

MAMMOTH

JUNE 25¢

MYSTERY



A \$2.50 Mystery Novel
...BRAND NEW

MORE DEATHS THAN ONE *by* **BRUNO FISCHER**

She pressed his hand tenderly and
whispered:

"Come back in
an hour...
I shall wait
for you!"

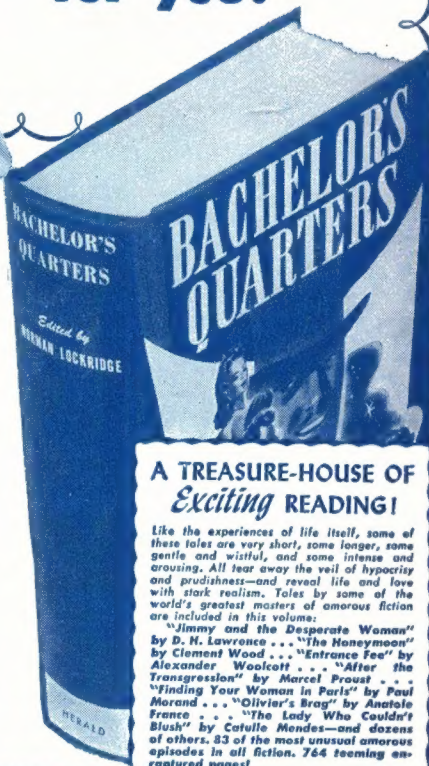


For many months Baron von Leisenberg had wanted to hear those words! His handsome frame quivered as they were spoken . . . was the exotic Clare, beloved of all men, ready to marry him at last? Or had she discovered some new trick to test his devotion? What happened when the Baron returned? What strange twist of fate was to make this rendezvous exciting beyond measure? Every word in Arthur Schnitzler's story "The Fate of the Baron" leaps alive with revealing human emotions. Every episode unveils new facets of excitement in the search for love.

"The Fate of the Baron" is only one of 83 amazing stories. Here is a collection of amatory fiction unsurpassed in all literature! Scores of tempestuous characters play turbulent roles in these pages. Selected from the world's best stories by a modern sophisticate . . . for the enduring pleasure of those who appreciate the bold, the venturesome, the exciting.

BACHELOR'S QUARTERS

Unlike ordinary fiction the stories in Bachelor's Quarters can be read with mounting pleasure time and again—just as you continue to enjoy looking at intriguing pictures. The passions of the ages are dynamically embodied in these pages. Nowhere else will you find such an incredible variety of saints and sinners . . . demi-mondes . . . paramours . . . Casanovas . . . Don Juans—those restless humans who are forever seeking new thrills in loving and living!



A TREASURE-HOUSE OF Exciting READING!

Like the experiences of life itself, some of these tales are very short, some longer, some gentle and wistful, and some intense and arousing. All tear away the veil of hypocrisy and prudishness—and reveal life and love with stark realism. Told by some of the world's greatest masters of amorous fiction are included in this volume:

"Jimmy and the Desperate Woman" by D. H. Lawrence . . . "The Honey-moon" by Clement Wood . . . "Entrance Fee" by Alexander Woolcott . . . "After the Transgression" by Marcel Proust . . . "Finding Your Woman in Paris" by Paul Morand . . . "Olivier's Brag" by Anatole France . . . "The Lady Who Couldn't Blush" by Catulle Mendes—and dozens of others. 83 of the most unusual amorous episodes in all fiction. 764 teeming enraptured pages!

FREE for your added
enjoyment...

"ONE OF CLEOPATRA'S NIGHTS"



The most seductive female in all history—Cleopatra! What strange influence did this curvaceous queen have over men—all men? Why did kings and commoners alike melt before her charms? "One of Cleopatra's Nights" takes you behind the scenes—into the most intimate quarters of Cleopatra's palace—and reveals the voluptuous nocturnal pastimes of the queen. In these burning pages is the secret of Cleopatra's power over men. Don't miss this amazing revelation! It's yours FREE with a copy of "Bachelor's Quarters".

SEND NO MONEY

You get "Cleopatra" FREE . . . "Bachelor's Quarters" for FREE EXAMINATION! All you have to do is mail the coupon with your name and address. Do it now—for endless hours of the most unusual reading pleasure you've ever had!

Herald Publishing Co., Dept. N-4501, 45 E. 17 St., New York 3, N. Y.

FREE EXAMINATION COUPON

HERALD PUBLISHING CO., Dept. N-4501
45 East 17th Street, New York 3, N. Y.

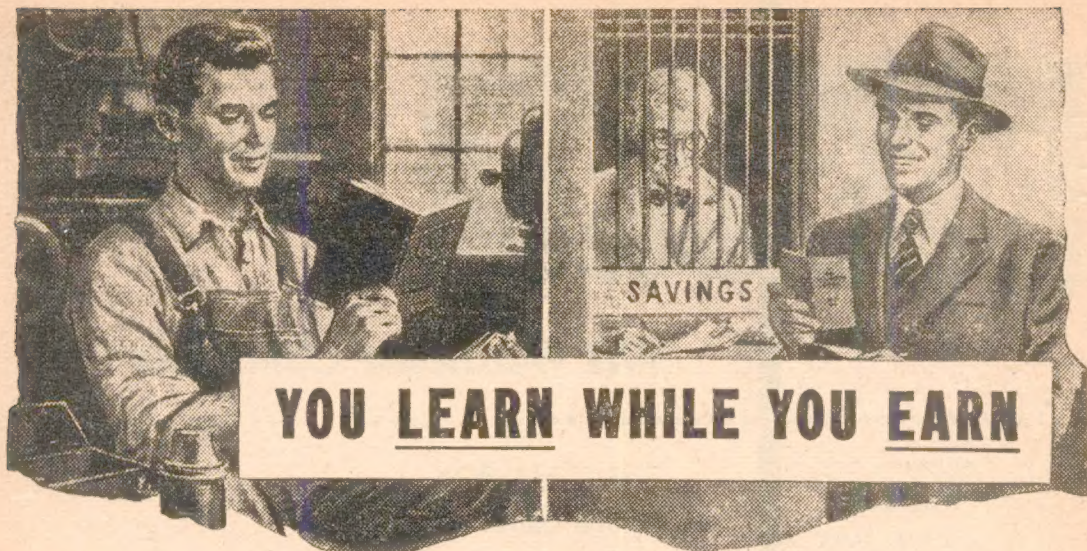
Please send me for FREE EXAMINATION a copy of "Bachelor's Quarters." Include my FREE copy of "One of Cleopatra's Nights." I will deposit \$2.98 (plus postage) with postman when the package arrives. If I am not completely satisfied, I may return "Bachelor's Quarters" in ten days and you will return my money. In any case, I may keep "One of Cleopatra's Nights" as my FREE gift.

Name.....

Address.....

City & Zone..... State.....

☐ Save Postage! Enclose \$2.98 with coupon and we will pay postage. Same FREE Gift, FREE EXAMINATION.



YOU LEARN WHILE YOU EARN

THERE'S rhyme and there's reason in that statement of I. C. S. advantages to you.

The courses of these famous schools are especially designed for study in your spare time. At work you prove and apply what you learn.

This system is backed up by 55 years of I. C. S. experience in training men in virtually every industrial and business field. It works so well that analysis shows about

99% of today's 100,000 active I. C. S. students are holding down jobs.

Many of the men and women now filling top positions in commerce and industry obtained their business or technical training from I. C. S. in just that way. What they achieved in *their* spare time, you can do in *yours*.

Start now — as they did — by marking and mailing this coupon:

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS



BOX 6203, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about

the course before which I have marked X:

- ☐ Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting
- Chemistry Courses**
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making
- Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses**
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting

- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- Communications Courses**
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering
- Electrical Courses**
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- Internal Combustion Engines Courses**
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines
- Mechanical Courses**
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals

- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric
- Railroad Courses**
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- Steam Engineering Courses**
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

- Textile Courses**
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing
- Business and Academic Courses**
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name _____ Age _____ Home Address _____
City _____ State _____ Present Position _____

Working Hours _____ A.M. to _____ P.M.

Length of Service in World War II _____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Enrollment under the G.I. Bill of Rights approved for War II Veterans.
Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

MAMMOTH

MYSTERY

JUNE 1947

All Features Complete

WILLIAM B. ZIFF
*Chairman of the Board
and Publisher*

B. G. DAVIS
President

Vice Presidents:

GEORGE BERNER
Sales and Advertising Director

MICHAEL H. FROELICH
Editorial Director

H. J. MORGANROTH
Production Director

H. G. STRONG
Circulation Director

Secretary-Treasurer
A. T. PULLEN

Art Director
HERMAN R. BOLLIN

Editor
RAYMOND A. PALMER

Managing Editor
HOWARD BROWNE

Associate Editors:
WILLIAM L. HAMLING
HENRY A. BOTT

Art Editor
MALCOLM SMITH

THE CALL BOX

By the Editor 6

GUNS OF CRIME

By James Ruel 70

NEWGATE PRISON

By Sandy Miller 70

THE CONDEMNED MAN'S LAST MEAL

By June Lurie 71

JIM, THE PENMAN

By Pete Boggs 71

YOUR DICE

By Robert Fordney 121

WHO IS THE CORPSE?

By Willis White 177

Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn and based on the
novel "More Deaths Than One."

Published bi-monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185
North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. New York Office, Empire State Build-
ing, New York 3, N. Y. Washington Office, International Building, 1319
F Street, N.W., Washington 4, D. C. Subscription \$2.50 for 12 issues;
Canada \$3.00; Foreign \$4.50. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks
for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be
addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company,
185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.



All Stories Complete

.....

MORE DEATHS THAN ONE (Complete Novel—80,000).....	by Bruno Fischer.....	8
Illustrated by Enoch Sharp		
When one person is involved in murder, solving it is easy. But when there are many . . .		
THE BLACK TEMPLE (Novelette—13,000).....	by H. B. Hickey.....	72
Illustrated by Joe Tillotson		
The Black Temple was a place where strange things went on—strange and dangerous . . .		
THE MARK OF CAIN (Novelette—10,000).....	by Arthur Leo Zagat.....	94
Illustrated by Malcolm Smith		
They tried to erase the hand imprint from the wall with paint. But murder stains deeply.		
AND CARRY ONE . . . (Short—3,000).....	by William P. McGivern.....	116
Illustrated by Fuqua		
A man who knows mathematics can figure his chances—except when the hand of fate steps in.		
HAIR OF THE DOG (Short—5,000).....	by Leonard Finley Hilts.....	164
Illustrated by Hinlon		
Dogs are sensitive animals. They know their friends well—and their enemies, too . . .		

.....

Copyright 1947, ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
Member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations

We do not accept responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. To facilitate handling, the author should enclose a self-addressed envelope with the requisite postage attached, and artists should enclose or forward return postage. Accepted material is subject to whatever revision is necessary to meet requirements. Payment covers all authors', contributors' and contestants' magazine rights in the U.S.A. and all other countries in the article and/or illustrations and for publicity and promotion in connection therewith and will be made at our current rates upon acceptance. All photos and drawings will be considered as part of material purchased. The names of all characters that are used in short stories, serials and semi-fiction articles that deal with types are fictitious. Use of a name that is the same as that of any living person is coincidental.

5

THE CALL BOX



REPORT BY THE EDITOR

DURING the course of the past few years in the detective, mystery fiction field, there has been a noticeable dominating influence—that of the so-called “hard boiled school.” The leaders of this school have been mainly three men: Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Dashiell Hammett. All three of these men have turned out work of repute. It was a natural thing that most of the detective writers in the country began emulating them; the fad caught hold with alarming rapidity. But it is to be regretted that something which was very good in moderation has in time become enormously overdone.

IN THE case of the “hard boiled school” the author invariably takes characters and burlesques their lives and habits. We know private detectives personally, and not a one of them is a boozier, shakes women off like a dog does fleas, or gets sapped every morning without fail before breakfast. The things a “private eye” does in the Chandler-Cain-Hammett story are as far from reality as a fairy tale. The same thing goes for the rest of the characters—especially women—in this type of story. It would seem that there are only two kinds of women, if you would believe the “hard boiled” boys. First, the dame who throws her sex around with abandon, and second, the mistreated, misunderstood female who is lead into harrowing circumstances by both the villain and the hero.

THEN we get to the dialogue. This is really a scream. Have you ever heard anybody talk like the characters in a “hard-boiled” book do? They couldn't. It takes too much time to think of cute things like that to say. Usually the author of one of these stories sits by the hour straining over one tricky line of dialogue. For example, one author we know used up a half-hour to get this little interplay: “I don't like your attitude.” “Yeh, I've had a lot of complaints about it lately.” See what we mean?

THEN there is the typical “hard boiled” opening to a story that grabs you by the throat and holds you. (It's supposed to, anyway.) For example, here is a typical opening: “The sap went up and down forty times. Maybe fifty-two. I was tired of it. Bleeding can be exhausting. ‘Ready to talk?’ Wide Hips said encouragingly.” (Private eyes, it is interesting to note are never

sapped by people with names. They are always designated as Long Nose, Wide Jaw, or Narrow Ankle.) Then there is the I-am-dumb-school. “I looked at a spot on his collar. He looked at the third button on my vest. We looked away. We looked back. ‘Tight collar,’ I said. ‘What's it to you?’ he said. ‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Why'd you ask?’ he said. He had me there.” See what we mean?

NEXT there's the cynical reckless rake. “I pulled open the drawer of my desk and pulled out the office bottle and a used blonde. The bottle was half-full, and so was the blonde. I threw the blonde away and emptied the bottle. Then I was half-full myself.” Does this strike a familiar note to you in your past readings? It should.

WELL, to get to the point, *Mammoth Mystery* and its sister magazine, *Mammoth Detective*, have given you the best of the hard-boiled yarns, and we've beaten the book publishers out with it in almost every case. So we're proud—and have a right to be. But right now we're going to continue to beat people to the punch; we're going to lead the parade to something new. Of course this doesn't mean that you still won't get the *best* of the hard-boiled type story, but you won't have the same old diet stuffed down your throat every month like they are doing it in the movies, on the radio, and in other magazines. We're not just sheep in a herd, and you readers aren't either—we can prove by your letters. You know darn well why you read this magazine in preference to others. You know you'll get first crack at the best, no matter when it comes to light, or in what particular slant it happens to be. Therefore . . . pause for an ahem . . . We present Bruno Fischer's 80,000 word sensation, “More Deaths Than One” in this issue! For this month, a Chandler is just an out-dated car!

WE WARN you—keep reading this magazine for the hottest, brand-new, coming-sensational-fad yarns in the detective-mystery field! And you won't miss the best hard-boileds either!

OUR shorter lengths this month are authored by Arthur Leo Zagat, Leonard Finley Hilts, William P McGivern and H. B. Hickey. So you know we're not lying when we say: “this issue is good!”
Rap.

ADVICE TO READERS:

who are suffering the miseries of

BAD SKIN

Stop Worrying Now About Pimples and Blackheads

and other externally caused skin troubles

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S
SIMPLE DIRECTIONS



SQUEEZING pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Because doing so may also be injurious and leave your skin with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally caused skin troubles. You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.

Good-Looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same healthy, normal complexion free from externally caused skin troubles simply by giving your skin the special care that handsome screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly cleanses the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—something that ordinary cleansing may not do.* In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of incomplete or faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser which penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. When followed by a quick application of Viderm Medicated Skin Cream, specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out; they dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin clean, clear and free of the specks that often bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

It's Foolish to Take Bad Skin for Granted

It doesn't pay to risk marred skin, blotches, blemishes. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsome and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes a skin that looks unhealthy, unclean, abused, and marked with blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH,**

CLEAR, ROBUST-LOOKING SKIN. Business executives don't choose men who have a poor-looking complexion. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive Viderm formula may help you.

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to keep it smooth and clear. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident that you will keep a smooth and clear complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment; then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smooth, clear skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 46; New York City 2, New York. By return mail you will receive both

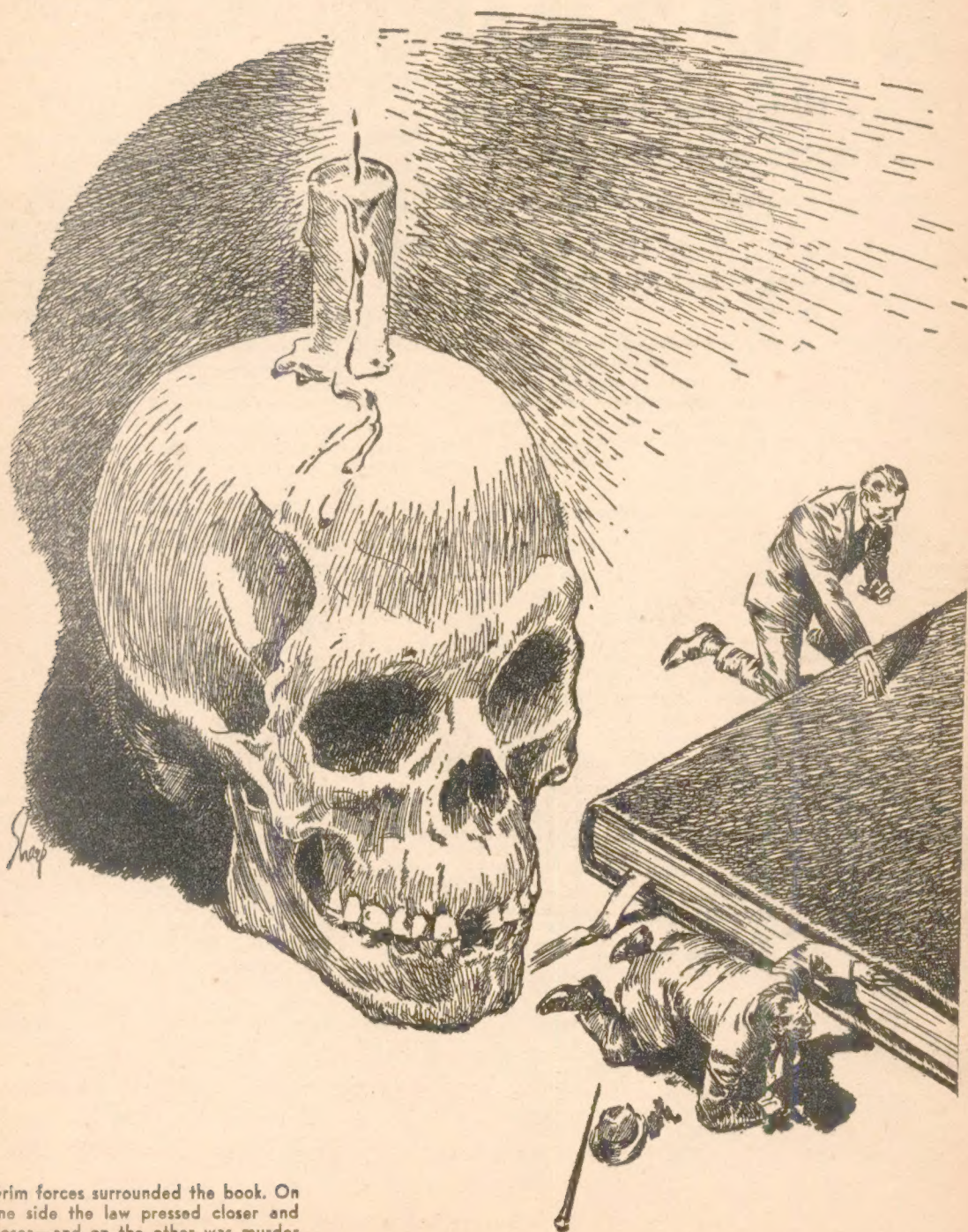
of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and packed in a safety-sealed carton. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.

DON'T DO THIS!



Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself wide open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clear and blemish-free complexion.

MORE DEATHS



Grim forces surrounded the book. On one side the law pressed closer and closer—and on the other was murder

THAN ONE

by BRUNO FISCHER

CHAPTER I

Frank Townsend
Tuesday, May 13
5:10 P.M.

THE jalopy squeaked up the concrete driveway and stopped a couple of inches from my left heel. Sheriff Valentine Stark got out and hitched up his pants. I kept on hosing down Mr. Matterson's convertible like I didn't know he was there.

"You use your fists too much, Frank," he said.

"That so?" I said.



A diary is supposed to contain secrets of one person—secrets that may even include murder. But this diary was written by many . .

He rubbed his chin, what there was of it. He had a long, sad face and teary eyes and always looked like he'd start crying any minute. The reason he was sheriff of Cagula County was his brother-in-law was state senator and had enough votes in his pocket to elect his pet police dog if his missus nagged him into it. The difference it would've made was the police dog would've known a little more about the job.

"Last night you beat up Ed Wonder in Teepee Inn," Stark said in that whining voice of his.

"I only hit Ed once," I said. "I didn't hit him hard enough to knock him more than halfway across the room."

"You think you're smart, that's the whole trouble with you," he said.

I put the hose full force against a hubcap. The water bounced off and sprayed his legs. He jumped out of the way, yelping.

He jabbed a finger at me. "I think I'll run you in and see how you like it," he said, sounding like a complaining old woman.

I turned off the hose and went into the garage for a chamois. When I came out, he was standing at the left front fender. I went around to the other side of the convertible and started to rub it down.

"So you got nothing to say for yourself?" Stark said.

"You want to run me in for socking Ed, go ahead," I said. "See where it'll get you."

"What's the matter with you?" he said. "Ed Wonder made a complaint and I got to investigate. I hear you was with the Atwood girl in Teepee Inn."

"Miss Atwood to you," I said.

"I been told he made a pass at her. Is that what happened, Frank?"

I looked at the sheriff over the hood. "Listen. I would've broken Ed's jaw if he'd made a pass at Miss Atwood. He danced with her. That was okay, only

he held her too close. I told him to break it up. He said I should roll my hoop, so I hit him."

"Is that all he did?"

"Nobody dances like that with a swell, clean kid like Miss Atwood," I said.

STARK hitched up his pants, but it didn't do any good. The seat kept on sagging halfway to the ground. With what they paid the sheriff of Cagula County I guess he couldn't afford a new pair.

"All the same, you should keep your fists to yourself," he said. "You're all the time beating somebody up. Like you beat up Mike Parker the day before he was killed. That fight was about another woman, about your sister Rachel."

"What's the difference?" I said. "Mike is dead."

Stark kicked a tire. "Killed with a shotgun," he said.

I worked the rag toward the back of the car. "Accidental death with his own gun while he was hunting. That's what the inquest said. Anyway, what's it got to do with Ed Wonder?"

He rubbed his chin some more. It was like watching wheels turn in his head—rusty wheels.

"I guess Ed Wonder was no more in the right than you," he said like he didn't want trouble with anybody.

"So what are you after?" I said.

"Well, I have to investigate," he said.

I went behind the car to wipe the rear window. Where I was I couldn't see him, and he'd run out of talk. Maybe he was trying to think. There was a chance that even the sheriff of Cagula County tried to think sometime. After a minute he gave it up and I heard him get into his jalopy. I heard the springs squeak all the way to the street.

"Frank," Mr. Matterson called me.

Mr. Matterson was standing in the doorway of his studio at the far corner of his two acres. I hung the chamois on a door handle and walked over to him across a lawn that wasn't any rougher than an army blanket.

The studio was fieldstone and big enough to hold a square dance in. Everything on the place was too big. He was only one guy living alone, but the fieldstone house had twelve rooms and he hardly ever had company stay overnight. The garage had room for three cars, but he had only the convertible. The apartment over the garage could've held a wife and a flock of kids, but I had it all to myself. He had four people working for him—a cook, a housemaid, a gardener and me. Lots of people paid for this by slaving in a factory his grandfather had built. I'd lay even money he didn't even know what they made in the factory or where it was.

Mr. Matterson was big too, tall as I was, but with lots of more meat, especially around the hips. He wore a dirty white smock splotted with every color of paint you could think of. That was what made him an artist.

"Come in, Frank," he said. "I want to show you something I've just finished."

I TAGGED after him into the studio. The pictures he'd painted covered all the walls, I guess because nobody else would hang them in their house. There were trees and flowers and tables and chairs and lots of undressed women, but I'd need the d.t.'s before I could dream up anything like them. The picture he showed me was on the easel. There was somebody without any clothes on, and one or two things suggested it was supposed to be a woman, but you couldn't be sure offhand. The eyes and nose were in the wrong places and the body was like a broken spring.

Off at a corner a goat with a man's face was shooting a crooked arrow at her with a bow without strings.

"How do you like it?" Mr. Matterson said.

"Well—" I said.

He started to giggle. "I was anxious to get the proletarian reaction," he said. "Does it mean anything to you?"

What it meant to me was that he was lucky he didn't have to paint for a living. But I didn't say it. "Well, Mr. Matterson, when I was in the army we'd never pin a picture like that up on our lockers, even if she isn't dressed," I said.

He laughed so hard his belly shook. "You're wonderful, Frank," he said.

He had pinchbottle scotch and glasses in the studio. He poured a shot of each of us and handed me one of his fifty-cent cigars and took one himself and we lit up. Mr. Matterson was rich and useless, but you wouldn't want a better guy to work for. He treated a chauffeur like a human being.

"I noticed Sheriff Stark talk to you," he said. "Is he still curious about how Mike Parker died?"

I tossed the scotch down my throat. "Didn't you hear what they found at the inquest?" I said. "Mike went hunting and dropped his shotgun on a rock and it went off and filled him with buckshot. That's all there was to it."

"And you were nearby," he said like he was telling me something I didn't know.

"Listen," I said. "It was Sunday morning and I was fishing in Edgeman's Pond. That's a good two miles away."

He poured himself another drink and looked at me. I shook my head. I'd had enough.

"You were working for Mike Parker when he was killed, weren't you?" he said.

"I was working for the Apex Construction Company," I said, trying to

keep my voice even. "Mike was only the foreman of the gang laying down the Crown Hill Road. Anyway, I quit the day before the accident."

"I heard he fired you," he said.

I didn't like the way this was going.

"Okay, he fired me," I said. "So what?"

"It's not important." Mr. Matterson blew smoke at the picture on the easel. "I don't think it's wise to interfere with the police in what is strictly their affair."

"A guy named Ed Wonder got fresh with a girl I was with last night," I said, getting real sore. "I smacked him. That's what the sheriff came to see me about."

"I take my hat off to a man who defends the honor of the fair sex as zealously as you do," he said with a smile as fat as his face.

THERE wasn't any answer I wanted to make. He walked away from the easel and started to unbutton his smock. I turned to go and stopped.

"Listen, Mr. Matterson," I said. "Are you using the car tonight?"

"I doubt—" He looked at me over his shoulder. "I see. You wish to borrow the car again."

"If it's okay with you," I said.

"Beverly Atwood, I suppose. She's a lovely creature. Are you getting anywhere with her, Frank?"

"How do you mean that?" I heard my voice very loud.

"Keep your shirt on, Frank. I was simply making conversation."

"Listen," I said. "There's no straighter girl than Beverly Atwood."

"I don't doubt it for a moment." He pulled his smock off and tossed it on a chair. "You can have the car," he said.

"Thanks, Mr. Matterson," I said.

There was a table between me and the door. When I passed it, I saw a

sketch pad on it and on the top page a pencil sketch of a girl. This wasn't like his painted pictures. You could recognize the girl right off.

I started to sweat. "That's my sister," I said.

Mr. Matterson came to the table. "I trust you like this sketch better than you do my paintings," he said.

"What was she doing here posing for you?" I said.

"I invited her to see my paintings. She is such a delightful subject that I couldn't resist sketching her. I assure you, Frank, that it was perfectly innocent."

That's what *he* said. You'd think an artist who painted pictures of women, even screwy pictures, would have models come to pose for him. But I'd never seen a woman, a professional model or any other kind, come or go out of the studio. That didn't mean none came. There was another door in back of the studio, and that door opened right out into a slit in the ten-foot hedge that ran all around the two acres. In town there were all sorts of stories about that back door, about women sneaking in and out. Maybe there was something in those stories and maybe not. Up to now I'd figured that it was none of my business as long as he paid me on payday and treated me regular.

But what was on the sketch pad was my business. I looked hard at the woman without clothes in the picture on the easel. She still didn't look like any woman you'd see anywhere. There was no way of telling.

"I say, Frank, you don't imagine Rachel posed for that?" Mr. Matterson said. "These are the only sketches I made of her. You can see for yourself that there is no reason to take offense."

"I don't want her coming here at all," I said.

His smile got fatter. "You don't

think I'm good enough for her?" he said.

"If you want to marry her, okay," I said. "But—" I let the rest ride.

"You don't trust me, Frank?"

"Not with a woman," I said.

His belly shook again with his laughing. "I suppose if I invite her here again you'll give me a beating."

"Let her alone," I said.

"I don't think you frighten me," he said slowly, "but I'd hate to lose a good chauffeur. Henceforth I'll cross the street when I see your sister approach. Will that satisfy you?"

"Just let her alone," I said.

He slapped my shoulder like I was one of the boys. "You've delightful, Frank. I've seldom known a man I liked so well. What particularly impresses me is that you're never obsequious. You're the only man who ever worked for me who didn't *sir* me half to death."

"I was in the army three years," I said. "I made up my mind that when I got out I'd never say *sir* to another man."

"Splendid," he said and laughed again.

There didn't seem anything else for me there, so I left.

WHEN I finished washing and polishing the convertible, I saw it was twenty after six. Dinner for the help was at six sharp because Mr. Matterson liked to eat at seven. They were way ahead of me when I came into the kitchen, but I shovelled down the onion soup and roast duck and trimmings and was out of there before the rest of them were through with coffee.

In my apartment over the garage I took a hot shower and shaved for the second time that day. I dressed in my pearl-gray slacks and the black cashmere sweater Rachel had bought me my

last birthday and the tweed sports jacket that had come yesterday in the mail from Sears. But all that my rushing came to was that I was all set at ten to eight and my date wasn't till nine o'clock because she didn't want to meet me till it was dark. I fiddled with the radio, but I was nervous as a cat and didn't want to listen to anything. At a quarter after eight I drove out in Mr. Matterson's convertible.

The Atwood house was right next door—one of a lot of frame houses on the edge of Rexton, with Mr. Matterson's two acres hidden behind the hedge plunk in the middle of them. Lots of windows were lit in the Atwood house, but I couldn't stop there and visit and wait till she got ready. I drove to town and had a pair of beers at Hal's. At nine I passed the Atwood house again, but I wasn't supposed to stop this time either. I wasn't supposed to stop till I came to the corner of Lane and Morgan.

Street lights didn't extend that far out, and all I could see was what the headlights showed me. That was her idea. If I couldn't see her, nobody else could. I waited. After a while I cut the motor and waited some more. All of a sudden there she was beside the right door.

She was a shadow in white. I leaned sideway to open the door. She got in beside me and pulled her dress over her knees.

"Am I late, Frankie?" she said.

"Only a couple of minutes," I said.

She was closer to twenty minutes late, but I was too glad she'd come at all to bring that up. The dash light showed her knockout figure and her yellow hair piled high on her head. I took out a cigarette, but I didn't offer her one. She didn't smoke. She didn't drink either except for a small beer now and then. I reached for the lighter in the

dash and then changed my mind and struck a match. I held the match between us so her face came out of the shadows.

Beverly Atwood didn't use makeup. She didn't pluck her eyebrows or paint her fingernails red. She didn't have to do the things other girls did to make themselves look like they were wearing wax masks. She had all she needed to begin with.

"Like me?" Beverly said.

"God!" I said.

THE flame was almost down to my fingers. I shook it out and started the car and drove north. We didn't say much. I could feel her sit close to me. I could smell her. It wasn't a perfume smell like with most girls, but a clean, sweet, live smell. I drove up the new Crown Hill Road.

"Didn't you build this road, Frankie?" she said.

"Me and a lot of other guys."

"I remember," she said. "Mike Parker was your boss when you got into a fight with him over a girl."

I glanced at her and by the dash light I saw her face turned to me. I put my eyes back on the road.

"It wasn't a girl," I said. I thought of a wisecrack: that was no girl, that was my sister. "I mean, it wasn't because we wanted the same girl."

"Rachel, of course," she said.

"What do you know about it?" I said. Now she was the one was making me sore. A few hours ago it had been Mr. Matterson.

"Friday night Rachel came with Mike to a square dance at the school," Beverly said slowly. "Saturday morning you had a fight with Mike."

She could've finished it. She could've said that Sunday morning Mike was found with a chest full of buckshot.

For a couple of minutes neither of us

had a thing to say. Our party was about spoiled. Then I felt her fingers on my arm. It was like being touched by something hot and cold at the same time. Through my jacket and sweater and shirt I felt it on my skin and it made my muscles quiver.

"What's the matter with you tonight, honey" she said. "You're so quiet."

We'd reached the top of Crown Hill. I swung the convertible into the wide semicircle where the road ended. The idea was for people to be able to turn around and go back after stopping to look at the view, but mostly it was used by parking couples at night. Two other cars were there already, dark and quiet, but you knew what was going on inside them. I parked all the way on the right, as far from the other cars as I could.

"Frankie," she said nervously, "why did you come here?"

"Look at the view," I said.

The moon was coming up, and through the windshield you could see half of Cagula County rolling off to the foothills. Off to the right were the lights of Rexton. There weren't many lights because it wasn't much of a town, but all the same it was bigger than anything else in the county.

I cut all the lights. Moonlight didn't come into the car. I couldn't see her at all now, but I could smell her clean smell.

"This isn't a nice place, Frankie," she said. "People come here at night for only one reason."

"Listen, Beverly," I said.

THE right words wouldn't come into my head. I reached out my hand and touched her, and all at once the rest of me was moving to her, and my arms were around her and I was kissing her.

Her mouth was soft and warm and open a little. She was kissing me back. I didn't want it ever to stop.

Then she pushed her hands against my chest and pulled her head back. I held onto her. —

"Frankie!" she said. "Frankie, stop it!"

I let her go. I felt her move all the way to the door.

"You'd better take me home," she said quietly.

"I wasn't trying to neck you," I said. "All I wanted was to ask you to marry me."

"Is that all?" Her voice had a soft laugh in it.

"Listen," I said. "I've known you a long time. You were only a kid when I took you to a high school dance."

"How thrilled I was," she said. "Frank Townsend, the greatest football player Central High school ever had. It was my first real date. How shocked I was, though, when you tried to kiss me good-night."

"I was a heel," I said. "But I never tried to kiss you again, did I?"

"I know, Frankie."

"Listen," I said. "That kiss just now was strictly on the level. You kissed me back. You can't say you don't like me."

"I like you an awful lot." She was quiet for a little while. "But it's not as simple as that. My parents would never let me marry you."

My hands got tight on the wheel. "I'm not good enough," I said. "I'm only a chauffeur. I guess if Mr. Matterson wanted to marry you that would be okay. He's not the kind of guy you'd want any girl to know, but he's rich."

"That fat tub!" she said.

"He comes to your house all the time," I said.

"Rudy Matterson comes to visit Daddy. They're friends. Is that my fault?"

"Okay," I said. "Dave Reese can

come right up to your house to call for you, but I got to meet you in the street after it gets dark so nobody can see you get in a car with me."

"Do you think I like it?" She said. "My parents are very strict. Mother heard that I was with you last night when you had that fight with Ed Wonder. She'd be terribly upset if she knew I was with you now."

"You don't need anybody's consent to get married," I said.

My eyes were getting used to the darkness and I could see enough of her to see her move a little. "Frankie, how can you ask me to do anything like that to my parents?" she said.

I felt like slamming something. "I suppose Dave Reese is a lot better than I am just because he has a good real estate business?"

"It's not that he's better," she said. "It's just that he makes a decent living. If you had a steady, reliable job, my parents would approve of you."

"I've got a steady, reliable job."

"A chauffeur!" she said.

MY HAND tightened into a fist. I waited till I stopped breathing so hard before I said anything. "So you'll marry Dave Reese because he's not a chauffeur?"

"I'm not going to marry anybody till I'm good and ready." Her voice got so hard I wouldn't have known it was her sitting beside me in the dark. "Besides, Dave and your sister Rachel are in love with each other."

"Listen," I said. "That guy can't see anybody but you. You going to marry him?"

"If you don't mind, I'll decide what to do with my life when I'm good and ready."

"Yeah?" I said. "You just got through telling how your folks live your life for you."

"Of course I wouldn't do anything to hurt them," she said. Her voice got soft and pleading. "Honey, we've been such good friends. You're the only man I know I'd trust parking in a place like this. Can't we go on the same way?"

"Yeah, friends!" I said bitterly.

Another car drove up and parked next to ours.

"I don't feel comfortable here," she said. "This place has such a bad reputation. And if I don't get back soon Mother will ask me where I've been. I can't lie to her, and if I tell her there'll be a terrible argument."

I drove her back to Lane and Morgan.

"About Mr. Matterson," I said when I stopped the car. "Just because he's a friend of the family, don't you go to his studio to look at his pictures or anything. He's a swell guy to work for, but he's after only one thing with a woman."

"Aren't all men?" she said.

I looked at her. "Not me. Not with you. I told you I was on the level."

"You're awfully sweet, Frankie, honey," she said. And before I knew what was happening, she leaned over and kissed me right on my mouth. Then she got out of the car and walked away.

I sat behind the wheel listening to the clicking of her heels till there wasn't a sound left in the night. I touched my lips. The feel of her mouth was still on them.

CHAPTER II

George Atwood

Tuesday, May 13
9:08 P.M.

"*GENERAL GRANT became president because they shot Lincoln. His foremost contribution was building Grant's tomb in New York.*"

My eyes lifted to the upper righthand corner of the paper. Elizabeth Burgess had written it. She was seventeen years of age, the possessor of a blatantly mature figure which she elaborated through the aid of tight sweaters. She would require no passing mark in American history II to become eminently successful in the career a sardonic nature designed for females. The mission of her sex was not to fill her pretty head with knowledge, but to spread tragedy among men.

I put aside the papers I was correcting and went into the kitchen. Kathryn was drying the supper dishes.

"Where's Beverly?" Kathryn inquired.

"I have no idea." I filled a glass at the cold water tap and stepped aside to permit Kathryn access to the dish drainer. "It may interest you to know that last night two men fought over our daughter. To complete the charming picture, it occurred in a beer joint."

Kathryn continued to wipe a dish. Twenty-four years ago I had married a serene, delicate-featured girl with the figure of a wood sprite. The ravages of middle-ages had only slightly altered that figure; time had been conquered by that indomitably placid face. Imperturbably she accepted my information.

"Why, dear, you know perfectly well that Teepee Inn is a respectable place. More than once you've taken me there for a glass of beer."

"I never got into a brawl over you," I pointed out dryly.

Kathryn regarded me with that secretive little smile with which she had striven for many years to drive me mad. "I can't imagine you fighting for anything, dear."

She was not a clever woman, but her sex knew how to hurt. No, I was not a fighter. I should have been principal of

Central High School, but I was not even head of the History Department. A younger and more aggressive man had obtained that position when my experience and service had merited it. I had not fought my wife for the son I had wanted—at least to attempt to achieve a son—nor to maintain my position as head of the household, nor for her affection, nor for the understanding and admiration of my daughter. I could not now recall how I had permitted myself to become a stranger in my house.

I held the water untasted before me. "Bill Wilcox, the math teacher, was at Teepee Inn last night with his wife, and he told me what had happened. I had to learn from a comparative stranger. Of course I am only Beverly's father. You did not think that I was entitled to know."

"What happened wasn't Beverly's fault."

"It was her fault that she went there with a roughneck like Frank Townsend."

"Men don't let her alone," Kathryn declared complacently. "It's the penalty a girl has to pay for being beautiful."

"I doubt that Beverly considers it a penalty."

"George, you can at least spare your daughter your cheap cynicism!" Her vehemence was so shocking because it was so unusual. "You should thank your stars that you have a daughter against whom there's never been a breath of scandal."

"I merely implied that she does not have to go out with Frank Townsend or any other man if she does not wish to."

KATHRYN turned to the drainer for a fresh dish to wipe. Her placidity, momentarily jarred, had returned. "They're all madly in love with her, and

she is so good that she can't bear to hurt any of them. Though I wish she would marry that nice David Reese."

"There I agree with you." I drank the water down and went out to the hall.

Beverly was descending the stairs. She was clad in a simple white frock which Kathryn had made for her; her hair, gathered into a rather severe bun, was like cornsilk. Her appearance was that of a healthy, wholesome young animal.

"What time is it, Daddy?" she asked.

"About a quarter after nine."

Beverly moved past me, pausing before the mirror to survey herself. She was nothing like Kathryn or me. She was taller by a head than her mother and by three inches than I; she was big-boned and lush, whereas both her parents were slender to thinness. She favored my sister, May, somewhat, although May had never been so beautiful.

"Are you going out?" I inquired.

"For a walk."

"Alone?"

She frowned into the mirror and re-adjusted a hairpin. "I might meet some of the girls on the way. Do you mind, Daddy?"

"Would it make any difference to you if I did mind?"

"Daddy, how can you say such a thing?" she said gaily. She gave her hair a final pat; a gesture, I thought, dismissing me or putting me in my place. Without another word or glance at me, she stepped to the door.

The door had scarcely closed behind her when Kathryn came out of the kitchen. "Where is Beverly going, dear?"

"Evidently that's none of my business," I replied.

Kathryn hurried past me. "Beverly!" I heard her call when she was on the porch.

I returned to the living room. As I passed a window fronting on the open porch, I saw Kathryn and Beverly in conversation under the street lamp on the sidewalk. That was, I felt, part of the ancient conspiracy between mother and daughter from which I was barred.

I settled myself into the armchair and picked up the history papers.

"General Grant became president because they shot . . ."

Elizabeth Burgess again. I copied those first two sentences on a scrap of paper, intending to show them to my fellow teachers for their amusement. For a time I sat holding the note limply between two fingers; then I tore it into small bits which I deposited in the ash-tray at my side. A man who laughs at stupidity is as cruel as one who laughs at any other affliction.

I LABORED through the remaining papers. I could not bring myself to concentrate on the task. Presently I gave it up and went out to the porch.

Kathryn was a motionless shadow erect beside one of the porch columns.

"Is Beverly now becoming ashamed to have a man call for her at the house?" I said.

Kathryn did not stir. "Why do you hate your daughter?"

Her tone was quiet, but her words were like the unexpected lash of a whip. That was the most vicious thing anybody had ever said to me.

"Because I show a father's interest in his daughter, is that a sign that I hate her?" I was so angry that my voice shook.

"She went for a walk to Grace Rubenstein's. Does that satisfy you?"

"I am grateful for any civil answer I receive from either of you," I retorted.

For several minutes my wife and I stood on the porch in silence. It was

spring; the air was soft and heady. A man and a woman passed the house. They did not appear to be younger than Kathryn or I by more than five years, but they strolled in slow intimacy with arms about each other's waists. Why must we continue to tear at each other's nerves? There had been a time when any argument had ended in kisses of atonement. That had been a time, also, when my arm had slipped naturally about Kathryn's waist.

My arm did so now, tentatively, as nervously and awkwardly as a young lover's. I did not feel her yield.

"Kathryn, let's go somewhere?" I whispered.

"Somewhere?" she echoed abstractedly.

"It's a pleasant night for a walk. Or let's sit here on the glider. Or—" I fumbled for words. I had forgotten how a man makes love to a woman, even to his own wife.

"I've a headache, dear." That phrase was automatic on her tongue; her headaches were confined to moments like these. She withdrew from the circle of my arm, and I was alone, as I had been for so long.

She entered the house. I remained at the porch railing and looked out at the quiet, elm-lined street. At my back was the modest, graciously aging house which I had bought when Beverly had been a year old. On the second floor there were three bedrooms; in those early days two had been adequate—one for husband and wife and one for the baby—and the third had been designated the guest room. Through a series of gently executed maneuvers, I had been relegated to that third room for increasing periods of time until I had given up the struggle and become its permanent occupant. Between that room and Kathryn's the years had beaten no path.

A SEDAN pulled up in front of the house. David Reese emerged from it and came up the walk with his free-swinging stride and jaunty carriage. Two at a time he mounted the porch steps.

"Hi, Mr. Atwood," he greeted. "Bev inside?"

"I'm afraid she's out."

His shoulders became somewhat less straight. "Any idea where she went?" he inquired, attempting to sound casual. "I sort of told her I'd drop in tonight."

"I believe she's visiting Grace Rubenstein."

"You sure? I passed Grace's house a minute ago. Grace was on the terrace and I stopped to talk to her. I told her I was going to visit Bev; she would've told me if she'd seen her."

I moistened my lips with the tip of my tongue.

David peered at me, as if trying to read an answer in my face. "Did she go toward Grace's house?"

"I think so," I muttered.

"How long ago?"

"Perhaps thirty minutes," I muttered.

He looked down the street. His head shifted slightly; his eyes fixed themselves on the high hedge which surrounded Rudolph Matterson's small estate next door. Was he thinking that Frank Townsend lived there and that it was on the way to Grace's house? He must have heard of the brawl last night at Teepee Inn; such news spreads almost as soon as it occurs. And Matterson lived there also. What of Matterson?

David Reese turned back to me with a deprecating laugh which rang false. "I didn't make a definite date with Bev. Can't expect a girl to sit twiddling her thumbs on the chance that I'll drop in."

"I'll tell her you were here, David," I muttered.

He did not leave at once. He stood

at the top step as if waiting, his boyish, freckled face static, yet as eloquent as tears.

Why do women do such things? She would never know a more personable or dependable young man. Since he had been a youngster he had sat at Beverly's feet. He was still there, in that humiliating and degrading position sex had designed for men.

David roused himself as if from a dream. "Well, so long, Mr. Atwood."

He departed less jauntily than he had arrived. After his car had driven off, I turned to the door.

Upstairs my room, which was still the guest room whatever else it was called out of politeness, waited for me. The thought of those lonely four walls filled me with terror. I stepped off the porch and found myself walking.

I passed the driveway entrance to the Matterson estate. Perhaps it was not Frank Townsend tonight. Matterson then?

I hurried on as if in flight from unseen specters, but the specters were in my mind, living with me, and there was no escape.

RUDOLPH MATTERSON was one of the few men in Rexton capable of informed conversation. I looked forward to the occasional evenings he came to my house. As he was a rich man living on unearned increment, it was almost inevitable that he salved his conscience by giving lip service to communism, chiefly because of its ruthless and reactionary aspects, and he was somewhat contemptuous of my socialism. Frequently our discussions became spirited, but on a rather high and stimulating level.

His politics, however, were not the concern of the moment. It had occurred to me before this that a man of his rather sinister reputation with fe-

males was strangely disinterested in Beverly during his visits to my home. He scarcely ever so much as glanced at her or had a word for her; it was not in character for him, or for almost any man, to show so little response to the physical presence of an attractive young woman. Was his lack of attention to her when I was in the same room deliberately calculated to hide the fact that there were surreptitious meetings between them?

Matterson then?

I strode in a kind of fury until I reached the business section of Rexton, now asleep with the night, and then I retraced my steps. The Matterson hedge appeared on my right. This time I paused at the entrance. It would be the ultimate in nastiness if my daughter were among those who were said to slip into Matterson's studio through the back door.

Did I, as Kathryn said, hate my daughter? Look into yourself, George Atwood. Do you resent your daughter because she is not the son you have always craved—the son who would have been all that you were not? If you maintain that you have never learned to know your daughter, how are you justified in forming a judgment of her? Is the evil only in your frustrated and cynical mind?

As a father, it was my right to know.

I turned into the Matterson driveway. Only one of two windows in the house showed light; the apartment over the garage and the studio were completely dark. The moon was sufficiently bright to guide me across the lawn. The studio door was unlocked. I stepped inside.

I was a thief in the night; I did not dare turn on the electric light. Instead I struck a match.

This was by no means my first visit. His agonized, abstractionist paintings

had left me bewildered. Tonight I was not concerned with artistic merit, but with features of his models. Within a minute I felt utterly ridiculous. How could a comparison be made between a human face and those monsters Matterson placed on canvas?

At one painting I paused longer than at the others. It was on an easel and depicted a particularly repulsive Pan shooting a crooked arrow with a stringless bow at an obscenely contorted caricature of a female. That flight of sardonic fancy I could appreciate. But the weird features, the insane female form—was there anything in it for which I searched?

Abruptly I felt tired and foolish and unwholesome. I had not the temperament for this kind of task. At the door I blew out the tenth or twentieth match I had struck and stepped out into the clean night air.

The lights of the apartment over the garage went on.

CHAPTER III Beverly Atwood

*Tuesday, May 13
10:32 P.M.*

SO NOW Dave Reese will be mad at me.

A few minutes after I returned home I heard Daddy let himself into the house. I went into the hall from the kitchen. He looked at me in surprise.

I couldn't imagine why he should be surprised in seeing his daughter in her own home.

"You're home early," he said.

"I told you I was just going for a walk."

"To Grace Rubenstein's?"

I hesitated for a fraction of a second. His mouth had that twist to it that always made me nervous.

"Grace wasn't in," I told him, "so I went to Marge Johnson's house instead of there."

"Why do you take the trouble to lie to me?"

So he had checked up on me.

He was like all the men, wanting to know every time a girl took a deep breath and why and what it meant. If I were a man I wouldn't have to apologize for being alive. Who said women were emancipated?

"Why would I lie to you, Daddy?"

I started up the stairs.

"David Reese was here," he said

Halfway up the stairs I turned.

"What did he want?"

"He mentioned an appointment with you."

But it hadn't been definite. He'd phoned me this morning. He'd been sore about last night.

It had been a mistake for me to go with Frankie to a public place like Teepee Inn where everybody would see us and it would get to Dave, and then Frankie made it practically a public scandal by getting into that stupid fight with Ed Wonder.

Well, this morning Dave and I had it out over the phone. I knew how to handle him, and at the end he said he'd be over in the evening if he could get away early enough. He had to show somebody a house at eight. Why should I hang around waiting for him when Frankie was more definite about a date for tonight?

"I didn't have a real date with Dave," I told Daddy.

Daddy just looked up at me from the foot of the stairs.

Nobody would think that that meek, insignificant little man could frighten anybody, but there was something deep and frightening about him when he looked at me like that.

I TURNED away quickly and went up the rest of the stairs. I knocked at mother's door.

"Beverly?" she asked through the door.

"Yes."

"Come in."

I wondered if she would have said come in if it had been Daddy who knocked.

Mother was undressing for bed. She was in her slip. At forty-six her figure was as smooth and slim as a girl's.

"Did you have a nice time, dear?" Mother said.

"We sat and talked for a while and then I came home."

That was practically the truth. I didn't have to say that it was Frank Townsend with whom I'd sat and talked. I had told her that I was to walk to Grace's house and she assumed that I meant Grace.

Daddy was the only snooper in the household.

Mother fetched her pink nightgown from the dresser, but she didn't take off the rest of her things and put it on. She was very modest, even in front of me, and I wondered if Daddy himself had ever seen her undressed.

She stood holding the nightgown and spoke about her plans to visit her sister in St. Louis next month. She wanted me to come along. I put her off by saying I'd like it, but not saying yes or no.

We kissed good-night and I went out.

Daddy came out of the bathroom. He looked at Mother's door and then at me.

"For God's sake, marry David," he said, "or let him alone."

When he kept at it long enough, he got under my skin.

"Daddy, we don't live in a country

where a father can decide whom his daughter should marry."

"Nor, unfortunately, where a father places his grown daughter across his knees and spans her."

That made a funny picture—me, bigger than he was, being spanked by him.

But not so funny either. There was still that look in his eyes that made him seem twice as big as he really was.

I wished he'd go to St. Louis for a while instead of Mother.

"Good-night, Daddy," I said, opening the bathroom door.

He glanced around at me as if he weren't sure he'd heard me.

"Good-night," he murmured and went into his room.

When I came out of the bathroom, I paused in the hall.

So now Dave was mad at me because I hadn't kept myself at his lordship's disposal.

He was mad at me most of the time, anyway. People only knew the gay part of him, but half the time he was with me he was moody or nagging me about one thing or another.

I WENT downstairs and dialed his home number on the phone.

He answered at the first ring. When he heard my voice, he just grunted.

"Honey, it wasn't a definite date," I told him. "When you didn't come by nine, I was sure you weren't coming at all."

"You weren't at Grace's."

"No. It was Madge Johnston's. Surely you're not jealous of a girl?"

"Frank Townsend wasn't a girl last night."

If I knew him, he'd keep bringing up that subject for weeks.

"Honey, you're not implying that you don't trust me with another man?"

"I never said that. But I don't trust

Frank."

That was funny. In all the years I'd known Frankie, tonight was the first time he'd kissed me. And he'd hurried to follow it up with a marriage proposal.

I supposed I was the only one who really knew Frankie.

"Well," I said, "for that matter I don't trust you with Frankie's sister Rachel all day in your office with you."

"Don't be stupid."

If he weren't so mad, he wouldn't have spoken like that. It made me mad too.

"If I'm so stupid, why don't you marry Rachel, who, I suppose, is so brilliant?"

"Maybe I will," Dave said and hung up.

I hung up too, but I didn't go away from the phone. A girl never got anywhere if she didn't give in a little when she had to.

I waited two or three minutes and dialed his number again.

"We're acting like children, honey," I said. "You know I love you."

"Then why don't you marry me?"

"Be here tomorrow and we'll talk it over."

All at once Dave's voice was eager.

"You mean it's yes?"

"Well, let's talk it over," I said.

"I'll be there with bells on. At eight?"

"Yes, Good-bye, honey."

So that fixed that.

I went up to my room and undressed. I'd have all day to work out how I'd handle Dave tomorrow night.

But I'd have to be careful.

A girl always had to be careful with men. They wanted you to be warm flesh and blood and at the same time as cold as a porcelain figure, and if you weren't both at once they got mad and jealous and fought each other for a glimpse of you.

All my clothes were off. I looked at myself in the dresser mirror. I'd have to watch my diet. Women like Mother were lucky. They ate anything they wanted and their figures simply shed the food.

But mother had been twenty-two before she'd got her first proposal, and that had been her only one. I was seventeen the first time a man asked me to marry him, and tonight I'd been proposed to by two different men, if I included Dave who'd been asking me for ages.

Only Rudy Matterson never . . .

My fists clenched at my shoulder.

A girl could hate a man and not hate him at the same time. She could want him dead and want him very much alive in the same moment.

Downstairs the doorbell rang.

I STOOD where I was before the mirror, with my arms crossed. Maybe it was because I didn't have a thing on that I was so cold.

The doorbell kept ringing. Some idiot was keeping his finger on the button.

It was at least eleven-thirty. I got colder and colder. I shivered all over.

It was very late for anybody to ring the bell.

I took my quilted satin robe from the closet and put it on and stuck my feet into my mules. I heard Daddy come out of his room and go downstairs. I heard him open the front door and then a man spoke in an excited tone.

I went out to the hall, but I couldn't make out what they were saying downstairs.

I opened the door to Mother's room. She slept soundly on her back. Nothing ever disturbed her, waking or sleeping.

I went to the head of the stairs and looked down.

"What is it, Daddy?"

The voices stopped. Daddy appeared at the foot of the stairs, and then another man moved forward. He was a tall, gaunt, sloppily dressed man—Valentine Stark, the sheriff.

Daddy was still fully dressed. For a long time he looked up at me standing at the head of the stairs. His thin face looked sick, and Valentine Stark's even thinner face looked sick too.

"What happened, Daddy?" I asked.

"Rudolph Matterson has been murdered," he told me.

CHAPTER IV

David Reese

Wednesday, May 14

12:10 A. M.

THE phone rang while I was taking off my pants. My watch said twelve-ten. Hardly an hour for random phone calls.

Beverly again? Maybe Bev saying she couldn't sleep thinking of how much she loved me and couldn't wait till tomorrow to tell me she wanted to marry me right away. I lost a couple of breaths as I scooped up the phone.

A woman all right, but it was only Rachel Townsend, my secretary and assistant at the office. She said: "Dave, I need a lawyer."

"For Frank, I bet. Whom did he sock this time?"

"Rudy Matterson was murdered," Rachel blurted.

I reached for the pack of cigarettes on the table, shook one out, snapped my lighter.

"Dave, did you hear what I said?"

"Where did it happen?"

"In his kitchen."

"How?"

"With a cookie jar."

"A what?"

"Oh, does it matter?" Rachel said. "I need a lawyer and you're one."

I put the flame to my cigarette, then said: "Why use a cookie jar? Frank never before needed anything to help out his fists?"

"Dave, you blathering idiot, Frankie didn't do it. Nobody knows who did. George Atwood is as much under suspicion as anybody. For that matter, so am I. I'm calling you from Rudy's house."

I said: "You don't have to tell the police anything. I'll ring up Joe Rubenstein. He's a good enough attorney for any—"

"I want you," Rachel cut in. "You're a lawyer."

"I haven't practiced in three years. Not since I learned that there was more dough in selling houses to people who couldn't afford them."

"Dave, for God's sake, come right over!"

I pulled smoke into my lungs. "In ten minutes," I said.

I put on pants, necktie, jacket. Then I left. I lived smack in the heart of Rexton, in what was called an apartment house because it had two stories, was constructed of hideous cream-colored brick, had eight apartments you couldn't swing a cat in and a garage under the building. And it had a name—Eagle Arms, no less.

I didn't take my car. I needed a walk to get myself back on even keel. I knew whichever way this turned out it would be bad. Very bad.

THEY were in the living room in Matterson's house. When I stood on the terrace, I heard their voices, glimpsed people through the picture window. He'd got it in the kitchen, Rachel had said. I walked along the terrace which was on two sides of the house, then along a colored flagstone

walk to the back door which led into the kitchen.

Abel Torrey was keeping the dead man company. Torrey was county coroner. His pay was five hundred a year, generously figured at around one hundred bucks an hour for the work he did to earn it. For a living he ran a filling station at the edge of town.

He sat at the kitchen table, brooding at a design on the oilcloth. He perked up when I entered. Glad, I guess, to share the presence of the dead with another member of the living.

He said: "Ain't it hell, Dave?"

It looked like hell. The kitchen was large enough to contain an entire three-room Eagle Arms apartment, with enough space left over for a couple of extra closets. Rudolph Matterson didn't lie far from the table. Blood glistened evilly on the green inlaid linoleum. His skull was a mess.

Against one bent knee was the large red earthenware jar. It seemed undamaged except for a minor crack running from its bulging middle to the base. From the broad mouth of the jar cute round cookies sprinkled with colored sugar decorations had spilled and scattered.

"A lot of good his money does him now," Abel Torrey observed profoundly.

I said: "That jar killed him?"

"Did you ever heft one of them bean jars?"

"Bean jar?" I said. "What about those cookies?"

"They was kept in the bean jar. My missus had one just like it, only smaller, and she uses it for cookies too."

I made a wide sweep of the thing on the floor. I didn't want to look at it again, but I did. So this lump of blubber was supposed to have made women become weak and amenable? Even Rachel. She'd posed for his screwy

pictures. Had come right out and told me. That was Rachel. She did something and didn't care who knew. But why would a smart, good-looking girl have wanted to mess around with that heel? His money? Not Rachel. Though how was a mere man to know what made a woman react?

I looked away from the dead and at the living. The table at which Torrey sat had on it two cups and saucers, a sugar bowl, sliced lemon on a plate, the round red bean pot cover with a fat knob in the middle. I went closer to the table.

Torrey warned me: "Don't touch nothing. The state police are coming to dust for fingerprints. Looks like Matterson was having tea with the guy who killed him."

"Any idea who?"

"Nope. Matterson was the only one saw him, and he ain't telling. Matterson didn't even have a chance to yell. He was killed instantly."

I said: "How do you know? You're no doctor."

"Doc Kendrell was here."

"Where's he now?"

"He made out the death certificate and went home. Nothing Doc Kendrell could do for him, was there? When one of them bean pots hits you, you're hit." He cackled. "Guess I better get rid of the one in my house. Maybe the mis-sus will get ideas from what happened here."

I PASSED into the oak-panelled dining room which could hold a banquet. Wide open double doors showed me the living room beyond—beamed ceiling, pickled-pine walls, a fireplace which could take a young tree at a time, massive furniture and deep chairs built for comfort. A man's room. At the moment most of the people in it were bunched near the picture window.

Rachel Townsend saw me through the open doors and came toward me. I waited for her in the dining room.

She said briskly: "Dave, do you know who inherits?"

"This estate? No."

"Whoever does will probably want to sell. We could turn a nice penny on the deal. I know Willoughby likes the place. I think he'd go to fifty thousand."

She didn't look like a ghoul. She looked like a very pretty dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, straight and slender in a business suit. Yet here she was pouncing on the idea of a fat commission to be made out of the fact that a man lay in the kitchen with a hole in his head. She might be a lass who liked to run around with men after working hours, but there was a completely different side to her in the office. A cool, efficient business woman who sometimes made me feel like a novice in the real estate racket.

The business woman went on: "Of course we should ask Willoughby sixty thousand. When we come down to fifty, he'll think he's saving ten thousand and he'll grab—"

Her voice faltered. She turned her face away, but before she did I glimpsed something crawl in the dark, bottomless depths of her eyes. She was talking real estate for the same reason a boy whistles when passing a graveyard.

I said: "What's going on in there?"

"I'm not sure. They're asking all sorts of stupid questions."

"Let's hear them," I said.

Together we went into the living room.

The representatives of Cagula County law and order were there in full force. Both of them. Sheriff Velentine Stark, a thin man, and District Attorney Kenneth Fleet, a fat man.

George Atwood stood in front of the

fireplace. Hands clasped behind his back. If I blocked out the room and the other people, I could imagine that he was lecturing to my high school class ten years ago—a wisp of a man with pale eyes, unhappy because I kept confusing Henry Clay with Daniel Webster.

FRANK TOWNSEND sat on the couch and smoked a cigarette with a kind of fury. That brute build and that dark, rugged face was what got the women. But not Beverly. Not Bev really. To her Frank was merely somebody to take her dancing now and then till she made up her mind to marry me. Damn it, that was all it was!

Also in the living room were Jerry Follette, the ancient, wizened gardner. And Etta Saunders, a mountain of flesh, who looked the way the cook should look and was the maid. And Mrs. Jordson, a slip of a woman, who cooked the way the housemaid should look and was the cook.

Kenneth Fleet came forward to greet me. "Ah, Dave," he said and pumped my hand. As if I'd come to a party. "I suppose Miss Townsend sent for you. I heard her call you on the phone."

I said: "Tonight I am a lawyer."

Frank stood up. "I don't need a lawyer. And if I did, I wouldn't hire you."

"Frankie, be quiet!" Rachel used her crispest business tone, strode to her brother's side, pulled his head down to the level of her mouth, whispered into his ear. Sullenly Frank subsided.

Nobody seemed to be able to think of anything to say, so I said: "What's the dope, Ken?"

"We know how and when," the D.A. told me. "The last time Matterson was seen alive was around ten tonight when Jerry Follette came home from town and saw him in this room."

"Sitting in that there chair reading."

The gardner nodded at a club chair standing at right angles to the fireplace.

The D.A. went on: "At ten-thirty Mrs. Jordson came down from her room to the kitchen for a drink of water. She found Matterson lying in a pool of blood. He hasn't been moved yet. If you want to see—"

"I saw him," I said.

"I just stood there and yelled," Mrs. Jordson announced proudly.

"Wonder you didn't wake Mr. Matterson up," Follette said. "I never heard nobody yell so loud."

"It woke me up," Etta Saunders said. "I ran down to the kitchen and saw—" Abruptly she started to sob.

The D.A. cleared his throat. "Frank Townsend heard the yells in his room over the garage and came running over to see what was up. He phoned Dr. Kendrell who lives next block. Dr. Kendrell says he got here in five minutes. He took one look at Matterson and called the sheriff."

"Doc Kendrell got me out of bed," Stark said eagerly, anxious to assert his authority by contributing to the talk.

The D.A. waved his dead cigar. "So we know that Matterson was murdered between ten and ten-thirty. I'd say a lot closer to ten-thirty, because he prepared tea for somebody after Jerry saw him in this room at ten. I was just about to put the pieces together, Dave, when you came in. Let's see what we have."

HE PAUSED and swept his eyes over us. As if we were a jury and he was going to do a job on us. When he was convinced that we were holding our breaths, he let us have it.

"Matterson had a visitor after Jerry saw him. The visitor didn't gain admittance by ringing either the front or back doorbell. Both doors have spring

locks. Etta made sure that they were both locked when she went upstairs to her room at eighty-thirty this evening. I understand that that is one of her duties."

"I lock the doors every night before going up," Etta declared.

"Yes. Well, those doors are still locked. All windows are screened and the screens locked on the inside. There's a third means of entry into the house—the cellar door. But I found that locked on the inside with a key."

"I always keep it locked," Jerry Follette said.

"Once the murderer was in the house, it was simply for him to get out. He had only to turn the lock of either the front or back door and let the lock snap shut when he closed the door behind him. But the point is—how did he get in?" The D.A. brought his cigar to his mouth, found to his surprise that it was unlit, took it out. "Both doorbells are connected to a buzzer in the maid's room. She says she fell asleep before ten o'clock, but—"

"The buzzer always wakes me," Etta Saunders asserted. "It's near my bed and I sleep light."

"This matter of how the killer gained admittance is important. He did not ring the bell because he did not wish to be admitted by a servant and seen by anybody but Matterson. He had come here to murder. In other words, the crime was premeditated."

The D.A. put a smirk on his face. He was showing us how a really clever D.A. could take a little here and a little there and reconstruct exactly what had happened a couple of hours ago and why.

"This is what happened," he resumed. "Matterson, reading in that chair by light of that floorlamp, was visible through the picture window to anybody who came up on the front ter-

race. The visitor tapped on the window. Matterson rose and admitted him through the front door. That was why no bell was rung. The visitor was somebody Matterson knew very well. He suggested tea and they went into the kitchen together."

"Wait a minute," I chipped in. "Wouldn't Matterson have called a servant to serve tea?"

Etta Saunders answered that one. "Oh, no. Mr. Matterson was a wonderful employer. Even if I wasn't sleeping, he wouldn't make me come down late at night for tea. He was always doing little things himself."

"Besides," Mrs. Jordson added tartly, "he thought he was the only one who knew how to brew tea. I never had complaints about my tea any place I worked, but Mr. Matterson always brewed his tea himself."

THE D.A. said: "So there we have Matterson and his visitor drinking tea together in the kitchen. The signs are plain. Matterson, having poured the tea, brought out the bean pot in which Mrs. Jordson keeps her cookies and placed the pot on the table. The fact that they were having tea in the kitchen shows that the visitor was somebody with whom Matterson did not have to stand on formality. Somebody with whom he was on very friendly terms. But he could not guess that this friend, this guest, had murder in his heart. He could not guess that when he stood up and turned his back for a moment, the visitor would snatch up the bean pot and bring it down on his head."

"A bean pot's silly," I commented.

"Is it?" The D.A. was wearing the supercilious smirk for the night. "Can you doubt it's effectiveness after what it did to Matterson?"

"Wasn't any sound made by the

visitor or Matterson?" I asked.

"The servants' quarters are upstairs and this is an extremely solidly constructed house. In addition, Etta was asleep. Jerry was in Mrs. Jordson's room listening to her radio with her. Even so, they would have heard an outcry or sounds of a struggle. We may be sure that conversation between Matterson and his visitor was in normal tones and that the murder itself was silently executed."

I set fire to a cigarette and let my eyes go around the room. Stark and the servants didn't interest me. Rachel and Frank and Mr. Atwood appeared to be waiting for something, their faces carefully empty. Maybe their thoughts too.

"I said: 'So anybody at all could have done it.'"

"Anybody who knew Matterson well enough to be invited into the kitchen for tea." The D.A. put a match to his cigar. That was another dramatic pause. "Like George Atwood, for instance."

Mr. Atwood unclasped his hands. He didn't look particularly disturbed. "I believe that evidence is required before a charge of murder is hurled at a citizen. Isn't that so, David?"

"Is it a charge, Ken?" I asked the D.A.

"By no means. Not yet, at any rate. But I want to know why Atwood was sneaking across the lawn outside this house at around a quarter after ten tonight."

Mr. Atwood said: "I protest your description of what I was doing as sneaking."

"But you were here. Frank Townsend says he saw you from the garage."

Frank stood up. Face as rugged and rigid as a rock. "All I saw was a shadow. Somebody walking. It was dark. I didn't know it was Mr.

Atwood."

Sheriff Stark pointed a skinny finger at him. "You told me yourself right after I got here. You said you seen Mr. Atwood go across the lawn."

"I didn't know what I was saying," Frank said woodenly. "Listen! I was getting ready for bed when I heard a scream in the house and I ran over and saw Mr. Matterson dead and blood on the floor. He was a good guy. I never knew any better to work for. Then when you showed up and started throwing questions at me, I spoke without thinking."

Stark said: "Don't be so smart, Frank. You said it. Just because you're sweet on Mr. Atwood's girl—"

"Shut up!" Frank said.

GEORGE ATWOOD stepped away from the fireplace. A little man, smaller even than any of the women in the room except Mrs. Jordson, but all at once he dominated the place. He said with a tired smile: "Thank you, Frank, but you needn't try to protect me. I was here at the time."

"Why?" the D.A. flung at him.

"To visit Matterson."

"What about?"

"We were friends. I consider it perfectly proper for men to call on each other."

"But wasn't it proper to ring the bell? The servants would've heard you ring. They didn't. What did you do, go right into the kitchen?"

I dug out cigarettes. Everybody watched Mr. Atwood, waiting.

He said calmly: "When I almost reached the house, I decided that it was too late for a casual visit and returned home."

"Just like that?" the D.A. growled.

"Yes," Mr. Atwood said.

I expelled smoke and kept myself from smiling. A quiet little man like

that would say yes till Doomsday. Only evidence could change his answer, and I wasn't sure even that would.

The D.A. switched his attack to Rachel. "Everybody just visiting," he said bitterly. "Miss Townsend, why were you visiting Matterson? Old friends too, eh?" The inflection at the end of that sentence was sheer nastiness.

Frank had sat down. Now he stood up for the third time since I'd entered the room. Took a couple of menacing steps toward the D.A. before his sister could hook a hand through his arm and bring him up short.

"Don't mind him, Frankie," Rachel said. "He's just trying to be clever. He knows very well that I was on my way to visit you."

"That's your story," the D.A. scoffed.

"I said: 'What goes, Rachel?'"

"I came to see Frank," she told me. "I saw a car parked on the driveway and heard excited voices in the house. I didn't think it was any of my business, so I went on to the garage. Then Ken Fleet pulled up in his car and saw me by the light of his headlights. He told me that Rudy Matterson had been murdered and made me go to the house with him. After a while he started to act as if I'd done it. That's why I phoned you."

The D.A. snorted. "Just paying a visit after eleven at night."

RACHEL was the cool, efficient lass dismissing a customer's objection to a deal. "Frank is my brother. There is nothing wrong in going to his room at any time of the day or night. Besides, it happened to be an hour after Rudy Matterson was murdered."

The sheriff contributed another mite. "Murderers return to the scene of their crime," he stated as if reading it out of a copybook.

The D.A. said: "All right, keep lying to me. I'll find the flaws." His cigar swung and fixed itself in a line with Frank's barrel chest. "Where were you tonight?"

Frank let his mouth hang open for a long moment. He wasn't as good as Mr. Atwood or Rachel. His face announced: Here's another lie coming. Aloud he said uneasily: "Mr. Matterson let me use his car tonight."

"For what purpose?"

"Just for myself. Mr. Matterson was swell that way."

"Where did you go?"

"I drove to Hal's bar and had a couple beers. You can ask Hal."

"When did you leave?"

"Around nine."

"Where did you go then?"

Frank looked at his feet. "Just drove around."

"With whom?"

"Just myself."

All at once I found it hard to breathe in that room.

The D.A. was saying: "So you have no alibi?"

"What the hell do I need an alibi for?" Frank said pugnaciously.

There were answers to that, but the D.A. didn't have a chance to give them. The doorbell rang. Automatically Etta Saunders jumped up, but before she could reach the hall we heard the unlocked door open. Beverly and her mother entered the living room.

Bev was a dream in white. White dress and shoes, fair complexion, and her hair was somehow subtly blonder tonight. Her coming into the room was like a dazzling light suddenly turned on.

Mrs. Atwood abandoned her daughter near the door and moved to her husband. No sign of worry in her sweet, calm face, but when she spoke there was a tremor in her voice. "Dear, is anything wrong?"

"Not a thing, Kathryn." One corner of his thin mouth lifted. I could see heavy sarcasm coming, the way it used to in history class when a student was particularly dumb. "Only that Matterson was murdered."

"I am aware of that. But why should the sheriff have dragged you out of bed in the middle of the night? Beverly and I could not sit at home and wait. We dressed and came over."

Mr. Atwood said dryly: "So I see."

It wasn't nice. It was more than the words Mr. Atwood used. His tone mocked her, treated her like dirt. If a man had to talk like that to his wife, why did he do it in front of a lot of strangers?

Then Bev was at my side. Her hand touched mine. Past her shoulder I saw Frank glower at us. She hadn't gone to him. Hadn't given him the smile she turned up to me. Or any smile. I love you, honey, she'd said tonight over the phone, and now she'd headed straight for me. Frank wasn't anybody.

THE D.A. had joined Mr. and Mrs. Atwood and was saying something I didn't catch. But everybody heard Etta Saunders. She exclaimed: "Oh, my God!"

Everybody turned to her. The huge housemaid gaped at me. No, not at me. At Beverly.

The D.A. said: "What is it, Etta?"

"I just remembered," she said thickly. "Last week. Friday afternoon it was. Mr. Matterson and Miss Atwood were having tea on the terrace. I came out with the tea things and there were Mr. Matterson and Miss Atwood"—she groped for a word—"struggling."

"Struggling?" the D.A. said.

"Well, he was trying to kiss her and she was fighting to get away from him. Mr. Matterson saw me standing there with the tea tray in my hands, and he

let her go. She didn't say a word. She walked off the terrace and down the driveway." Etta's vast bosom heaved. "I didn't tell a soul what I saw because I thought a lot of Mr. Matterson, and I didn't want people to think I was working for a man who did such things. But now Mr. Matterson being murdered, I guess I ought to tell everything I know."

"Thank you, Etta," The D.A. turned to Beverly. "Well, Miss Atwood?"

Beverly fluffed her yellow hair. "Rudy Matterson was a beast. Any woman can tell you that. You can ask Rachel Townsend."

Rachel said rather brightly: "It depends on the woman. I found him a perfect gentleman."

"Different girls expect different things from a gentleman," Beverly said sweetly.

The feline streak in them. When women got like that, all a man could do was to be embarrassed.

"Please, girls," the D.A. said weakly. Bev swayed against me so that our shoulders touched. She said to the D.A.: "I met Rudy in the street and he invited me to his place for tea. He visited my home often as a friend of my father, and it was only being politely sociable to accept his invitation. Perhaps I shouldn't have, knowing his reputation, but it was broad daylight and we would be on the terrace. While we were waiting for tea to be served, he told me that he admired my figure and would like to paint me."

Frank growled deep in his throat.

She went on hurriedly, as if to cover that growl: "Naturally I refused. He kept telling me how beautiful I was, and all of a sudden he put his arms around me. Naturally I struggled. I don't know what might have happened, but just then Etta came out with the tea and he had to release me. I did the one

thing a self-respecting girl could do. I left."

There was a brief silence. Then Mrs. Atwood said bitterly to her husband: "And you kept inviting that man to our home, George."

Mr. Atwood laughed unpleasantly. I couldn't understand why he laughed like that or what it meant. Just that short, jarring laugh without saying anything.

THEN Sheriff Stark pitched in, suddenly cocky and confident. "Like I thought all along. Last night Frank got in a fight with Ed Wonder over Miss Atwood. Then he found out Mr. Materson got fresh with her, so he killed him."

Frank said: "Listen! I didn't know about it. I'd have beaten his ears off. But sock a guy with a pot! Hell, I've got fists."

"Smart," the D.A. commented. "A smart killer would use that sort of weapon it'd be unlikely he'd use. Like a man who's handy with his fists using a bean pot."

Beverly said: "What time was Rudy murdered?"

There was a breathless quality to that question that made something inside of me jump. And the way the others looked at her, it was plain that they reacted similarly.

"Between ten and ten-thirty," the D.A. told her. "His body was found at ten-thirty."

She smiled. "Then Frankie is certainly innocent. He was with me until ten-thirty tonight."

Last night and then again tonight!

There was a stillness in the room as if all the air had been suddenly sucked out of it. I didn't look around or at Bev or anywhere but directly ahead. In my line of vision I saw Mr. Atwood's mouth become as thin as a knife edge,

Mrs. Atwood frown, the D.A.'s smirk fill all of his fat face.

"Were there witnesses, Miss Atwood?" the D.A. purred. Setting a trap. If I warned her, it would only make it worse.

She patted her hair negligently. "Frankie and I went for a drive and didn't stop off anywhere. Though, of course, I'm a witness."

Frank said heavily: "You didn't have to tell, Beverly."

I no longer felt her shoulder against mine. She'd moved away, an inch or two, but it was like a million miles. I heard her say: "Why shouldn't I tell? It was perfectly harmless. Certainly in this day and age there's nothing wrong in a girl going for a drive with a young man."

"Ten-thirty, Miss Atwood?" the D.A. said, opening the mouth of the trap wide. "You're sure it was ten-thirty?"

"Of course I'm—"

"You're not sure, Bev," I practically shouted. "You're not wearing a watch."

SHE threw me a startled glance. She opened her mouth, but before she could put her foot in it, her father said quickly, as if taking a dive: "Beverly, don't you remember that when you left the house tonight at nine-fifteen you had no idea what time it was? You had to ask me."

The D.A.'s smirk gave way to anger. "Why are you men afraid to let her speak for herself?"

"There's no sense confusing the time element," I said. Monumental lack of logic, that, but I knew what I was doing. "You see, Bev, you couldn't have been with Frank till ten-thirty. At ten-fifteen Frank was in his room and saw your father from the window."

She said in a small thin voice: "Saw

Daddy?"

And Mrs. Atwood said in bewilderment: "I'm sure you were at home all evening, dear."

Mr. Atwood shrugged skimpy shoulders. "I was on my way to visit Matterson. I canged my mind and returned home. Mr. Fleet is attempting to read significance into that act."

Beverly didn't give up easily. She insisted: "But if Frank saw Daddy, it must have been after ten-thirty."

The D.A. brought his smirk back. "We know it was quite a few minutes before ten-thirty, because at ten-thirty Mrs. Jordson discovered the body and screamed. Frank rushed over from the garage. That means he'd come over before then."

Frank said: "So Beverly made a mistake about what time I left her. What the hell's the difference? You still got nothing on me."

"I'll tell you what I've got." The D.A. swung his cigar to include everybody in the room. "I've got a conspiracy. I've got people trying to cover up each other. This is murder, and anybody who tries to help anybody else get away with it is an accessory after the fact. Now then, I want the truth from all of you."

It lay like that for long moments. Nothing happened, of course. What had the D.A. expected—that somebody would break as a result of his outburst?

Then Stark said petulantly: "Frank done it. Miss Atwood knows he 'did. Tonight she told Frank that Mr. Matterson tried to attack her and when he came home he killed him. That's why she tried to give him that fake alibi. I'm the sheriff. I'm going to arrest Frank."

"Dave," Rachel said. She sat on the couch, legs crossed, fine knees showing, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. Through the smoke weav-

ing across her face her dark eyes told me that she needed me. If not for herself, for Frank. For all I cared, he could hang ten times over. But it wasn't that simple. The D.A. was right. We were all against him, each of us for a different reason maybe, but all of us frightened by the implications of Rudolph Matterson lying dead in the kitchen.

I said: "You'd be wasting your time, Sheriff. I'd have Frank out of jail by morning, and the D.A. knows it. You haven't more against him than against a number of other people. Including myself, if it comes to that. The fact is, that everybody in Rexton who knew Matterson even casually is a possible suspect. In other words, you're exactly where you were the moment you walked into this house tonight."

The D.A.'s smirk was permanently dead. He looked depressed. "We may find fingerprints," he muttered.

"Let's hope so," I said, "but do you want to bet you don't? Nobody is stupid enough to leave fingerprints."

In the room somebody sighed. I didn't know who it was, but it was as if everybody in the room except the D.A. and the sheriff uttered that sigh. With relief.

CHAPTER V

Kathryn Atwood

Wednesday, May 14
8:25 P.M.

TWILIGHT is the loveliest time, and May the loveliest month. It is a period of gentleness and rebirth. In the soft hush of the departing day I strolled through the garden. The flower beds were as yet barren; the myriad-colored heads of flowers bobbing at me were for later and hotter days. But along the side of the house bridal

wreath stretched skywood their arms filled with virginal blossoms, and the two dogwood trees were breath-takingly white against the grayness seeping in from the east.

As I passed one of the two side living room windows, the subdued mutter of voices drifted out to me. The young lovers sat in almost complete darkness, for romance does not like the harsh glare of electricity. At that moment David Reese raised his voice, and I could not help but hear what he said.

"If you claim you love me, why do you keep running around with other guys?"

I approved of David, but like most men he possessed a streak of vulgarity. I was glad to hear that my daughter resented it as much as I did.

"Running around!" echoed Beverly. "You sound as if you think I'm dissolute."

"You know I didn't mean anything of the kind. God, Bev, I'd kill anybody who said anything about you."

"Don't say that!" cried Beverly.

"Say what?"

"About killing anybody. Rudy Matterson was murdered right next door last night and the police are suspecting everybody who ever knew him and—well, you ought to be careful of what you say."

"Holy cats!" exclaimed David. "You don't think I had anything to do with it?"

"What an absurd notion, honey! But you're so awfully jealous and now you talk about killing anybody who—"

"You bet I'm jealous. You give me plenty of reason. But if I started knocking off every guy I was jealous of, I'd have to go around with a tommy-gun." His voice lowered; I had to move closer to the window to hear him. "You're driving me crazy with those other men."

"We're not living in the last century," said she sharply. "I can go dancing with a man or take a ride in his car without losing my honor. I'm sure I've never done anything I'd be ashamed to have you or Mother or anybody else know, and I'm sick and tired of you doubting me."

"I never—"

"When I'm married to you, honey, it'll be different. I'll never as much as look at another man."

"You mean you're telling me you'll marry me?" burst out David.

"Honey, honey, don't you know that you're the only man I ever really loved?"

An eloquent silence ensued. There can be no tenderer moment than two young lovers kissing.

I STROLLED to the back of the house where over the years we had cultivated every inch of our narrow, two-hundred-feet deep property. I moved along the paths between the dormant flower beds, through the tiny peach orchard, and to the grape arbor at the far corner.

The arbor was close to the hedge which separated my property from Rudolph Matterson's—rather, what had been his property. I observed that the wild honey suckle, which had been cleared last autumn, had obtained a new lease on life; it was again spreading out to choke the arbor and hedge. I would have to hire a boy to uproot it properly.

Last night Rudolph Matterson was uprooted from life.

The man had often been a guest in my home, but I had scarcely known him, and what I had known of him I had disliked. He had possessed a certain charm of manner, but I was not one to be deceived by such a facade. I had been aware that behind it had been

the real creature, a dilettante artist who painted nudes, a suave lecher, a being without a single moral attribute. He was not a man to be welcomed to a home which contained a beautiful unmarried daughter, but George had had a curious affection for him, and as a dutiful wife I had received him with as good grace as I could muster.

No, there was no reason why I should feel any particular regret at his passing. Yet as I stood beside the impenetrable hedge, I experienced an overbearing sense of sadness.

I retraced my steps. As I turned the corner of the house, I saw George stand close to the window through which I had heard the conversation between Beverly and David. Their voices were again audible.

George was within several feet of me, but in the gathering gloom he did not notice me. He was concentrating on the talk of the two young lovers in the living room. I was ashamed of him.

David's voice came argumentatively through the open window. "Are you trying to drive me completely off my nut? You say you'll marry me and everything is fine, and then when I try to pin you down to a date, you say next year. And next year you'll say next year. Do you or don't you want to marry me?"

"It's not that. I don't want to leave Mother alone just yet."

"She has a husband, hasn't she?"

George uttered an only partly suppressed snort. He was always full of snorts and grimaces which had no meaning.

"All the same, Mother will be lonely without me," replied Beverly. "She is very attached to me. After all, I'm her only child."

"Won't she be just as lonely without you a year from now?"

"Please don't nag me, honey. I've

thought it over and my mind is made up. Next year it will be easier to leave her."

"Why will next year be easier than now?"

It was going to be one of those interminable lovers' squabbles which were interesting only to the participants.

I raised my voice. "Good-evening, dear."

Beverly's reply to David was cut off in the midst of a word. Aware now that people were outside the window, they became silent.

GEORGE stepped away from the window, and together we walked to the front of the house.

"If David were half a man, he would wring her neck," said he when we reached the foot of the porch steps.

"I'm surprised at you for eavesdropping."

His thin mouth twisted at the right corner, in that way that had annoyed me for so many years. "I have learned that it is females who insist on a double standard of morality."

Another thing that annoyed me about him was his insistence on referring to women as females. And still another thing was that he was seldom capable of a civil statement. I did my best to make a pleasant home for him, but he had never once as much as indicated that he appreciated my efforts.

"We have to defend ourselves from men who try to drag us down to their level," was my retort.

He uttered his short, harsh laugh. "I wonder if you are stupid or if you deliberately pretend never to understand me."

A wife becomes hardened to a husband's insults and learns to shed them as a duck sheds water. I changed the subject.

"Dear," said I, "I can't believe that Frank Townsend murdered Rudolph

because he learned that Rudolph had tried to—to become fresh with Beverly.”

“Why can’t you?”

I folded my hands and looked at his pinched face shadowy in the deepening twilight. “I couldn’t stand having our daughter’s name dragged into a murder trial.”

“So all that the murder means to you is the possibility of a minor scandal?”

His tone bore its usual quota of mockery. Why couldn’t he speak to me the way other husbands spoke to their wives? But I would not let him know how greatly I resented his manner.

“Dear, last night in Rudolph’s house didn’t Mr. Fleet mention that he hoped that the murderer would be identified through his fingerprints? It seems to me that the police would have had enough time to—”

“There were no fingerprints,” he interrupted me. “Sheriff Stark visited me at school this afternoon and requested me to attend the inquest tomorrow. He told me that the murderer had had the wit to wipe the tea cup.”

“Then it must have been somebody very clever,” said I.

George looked at me with his mouth twisted. “It must be a relief for you to know that a dull-witted, fumbling man like your husband would not have thought of removing his fingerprints.”

Having said that, he turned and ascended the stairs. His shoulders were bowed as if with weariness.

I entered the house a minute later. A floorlamp was now lit in the living room. As I passed the doorway, I saw David Reese stride back and forth in front of the fireplace. He was alone. I mounted the stairs.

BEVERLY came out of her room. She wore her brown flannel skirt

and the yellow blouse I had made last month to match the skirt. No mother had a more perfect model for whom to sew. Over her arm she carried her brown-and-white checked topper.

“Are you going out, dear?” I asked her.

“Only for a walk with Dave. I’ll be home early.”

“I’ll find the house empty when you marry,” said I, “but we’ll see each other every day if you live in Rexton, as, of course, you will.”

“You want me to marry Dave, don’t you, Mother?”

“He’s a splendid boy.”

She tossed her gorgeous hair. “He nags too much. He’s always arguing and finding fault.”

“A woman must not look for a god on earth,” said I. “She must accept the best she can get.”

“Oh, I’ll marry Dave all right, but I hate to be rushed.” My big daughter patted my cheek. “Well, Dave is waiting for me.”

She rushed away from me with the bouyant rapture of youth. I moved on to my room.

I had come for my knitting bag, but I did not turn on the switch. There was barely enough light to see my way across the room. I stood at the window. The world outside had grown dark also. From my height on the second floor I could look over the hedge. The floodlights over the driveway next door were on, and in their glaring illumination I observed a man carrying two suitcases from the garage. At that distance I could not distinguish his face, but his brutish figure told me who he was.

Frank Townsend was leaving, following the other servants who had departed in the afternoon. A empty house was left, and there was a man to be buried.

A coldness lay about my heart. Why should Rudolph’s death mean more to

me than that of a moving picture actor whom I had known only a shadow on a screen? I looked deep into myself and wondered if what I felt was not sorrow but fear. For his manner of death was a thing of terror, of police and suspicions and perhaps scandal, of the possibility of dreadful ramifications and complications.

My gaze shifted to the small section of street within my line of vision. Arm in arm, Beverly and David passed. They strolled very slowly, as lovers will, oblivious to the world about them.

I turned my head. Frank Townsend was returning to the garage after having placed his bags in the driveway. The floodlights were out.

I picked up my knitting bag from the dresser where I had left it that afternoon. I took it downstairs to the living room and turned on the lamp beside the couch and resumed work on the cardigan sweater set I was knitting for my daughter.

CHAPTER VI

Frank Townsend

Friday, May 16
3:13 P.M.

A GUY couldn't even get drunk. In thirty minutes I poured three double ryes into an empty stomach and nothing happened. I ordered a fourth.

Hal didn't pay any attention to me. He was at the door end of the bar, talking to a couple of men I'd never seen before.

"Damn it," I said, "let's have the bottle."

Hal turned his beefy face to me. "You had enough for this early, Frank," he said.

"Damn it, isn't my money good?" I said.

Hal came over and put the bottle

down in front of me and went back to the men. I poured. I didn't spill a drop. I put both hands around the glass, but I didn't raise it.

After a while I heard the door open and close. The two men were gone. I looked up and saw Hal stand in front of me, leaning his elbows on the shelf behind him. His head was round as a balloon and had just about as much hair.

"A real cop came to town this morning," he said.

Hal had waited till we were alone before talking about it. It was too soon after lunch for the beer drinkers and too early in the day for the hard drinkers. Except for a guy who was trying to drown the thoughts in his head in whiskey.

"What cop?" I said.

"A private detective all the way from New York. The County Supervisors had a meeting and voted to hire him to work on the Matterson murder."

He ran a towel over the bar. The bar was clean. He wiped it so he could lean toward me and look close into my face to see how I took the news.

"I don't believe it," I said, "till you show me how the County Supervisors can make dough for themselves by hiring a private cop."

"It ain't legal to knock off a rich guy like Matterson," Hal said. He tossed the towel under the bar. "Kill anybody else in this county, and they bury him and forget about him. But don't let anybody make the mistake murdering guys with dough. That's against the law."

I PICKED up my glass a little way and put it down without tasting the rye. Hal's head was a balloon all right. It started to float toward the ceiling.

"What about this private cop?" I said. "Is he any good?"

"Vall Stark says he's a whizz."

"How would Stark know if a cop is any good?" I said.

Hal chuckled. "You got something there," he said. "Anyway, Stark had a beer here before the train came in this morning. He told me all about this detective. Ben Helm his name is. He writes books and lectures at colleges on how to catch crooks. What do you think of that—an educated cop? All these modern scientific methods. The way Val Stark talks, the guy is going to take a look around and say, 'There's your killer,' and take the next train back home."

"I saw 'em in the movies," I said. "They wear beards and smoke pipes and nothing fools them. The hell with him."

Hal's balloon head snapped back onto his neck and leaned over to me. His eyes and nose and mouth all came together and looked like a single hole in a blank surface.

"You scared of him, Frank?" Hal said softly.

I put both hands flat on the bar. "What d'you mean by that crack?" I said.

"Nothing," Hal said in a hurry. "Frank, you been drinking too much too early."

"You're only a barkeep," I said. "Don't try talking like my sister."

I brought the glass all the way to my mouth. The stuff tasted bitter on my lips. I looked into the glass and didn't see whiskey. I saw what I always saw, when I was awake or sleeping, the face of an angel.

I put down the glass and went into the phone booth and slipped a nickel in the slot and dialed.

"Hello?" Mrs. Atwood's voice said.

I hung up without saying a word. What was the good? If I asked was Beverly in, Mrs. Atwood would recog-

nize my voice and say she was out. If Beverly herself answered, it would come to the same thing. She'd talk to me nice and friendly, but she was going somewhere with her mother or had a headache or something and she wasn't sure she could make a date tomorrow or the next day.

Up to three days ago I hadn't had much trouble dating her. Up to the night I'd asked her to marry me—the night Mr. Matterson was killed.

I went back to the bar and picked up the double rye and without sitting down poured it down my throat. It felt flat inside of me. I couldn't even get drunk.

"I need a man behind the bar, Frank," Hal said. "How'd you like a job?"

I put down the empty glass. "What gives you the idea I wouldn't drink up your profits?" I said.

"You're not a soak, Frank," Hal said. "Okay, a man is entitled to go on a bender now and then, but you drank more today than I ever seen you. I've known you since you was a kid. You never hung around doing nothing like lots of others I could name. You always worked hard and steady, and you're honest. I need a man I can trust at the register when I'm away."

I COULD use a job. But what kind of job was it being a barkeep? It was no better than driving a truck or working on a road gang or chauffeuring a rich guy or doing all the other jobs I'd ever done for a living. Beverly wouldn't marry a man who couldn't support her in style. I didn't blame her. What kind of a life would it be for a girl like her being Mrs. Chauffeur or Mrs. Barkeep?

Damn it to hell, why didn't I finish high school like Rachel begged me to and then go to college?

"What say, Frank?" Hal said. "It's worth fifty a week to me to have a reliable, honest man like you."

The whiskey was spreading through my body. All of a sudden it made me feel warm and light. I felt myself smile.

"Aren't you scared?" I said.

"I said I wasn't worried about you drinking. You'll level off soon as you work steady."

"I mean scared of being my boss," I said. "You know what happened to my last two bosses—Mike Parker and Mr. Matterson."

Hal looked at me with his eyes queer. "You trying to be funny?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm a comedian," I said.

I started to walk to the door. My legs wobbled a little.

"You didn't pay for your drinks," Hal said.

I fished out two singles and two dimes and slapped the dough down on the bar. Then I said: "The only job I want is something like a doctor or a lawyer or a real estate broker."

Hal turned from the cash register and looked at me. His head had come off again and looked down at me from somewhere near the ceiling. I started to laugh. I sounded nuts to my own ears. I broke off laughing. The door floated toward me.

Sunlight jabbed into my eyes. Heat bounced off the macadam road and twisted my stomach. I turned back to the ginmill. If I was going to be sick, I didn't want it to be right out in the open where everybody in town would see.

I stopped with my hand on the door-knob. I was okay now. I was a little drunk, not messy drunk. The only thing wrong was I hadn't eaten lunch. I stepped back into the sunlight and my stomach held on. The match I brought up to my cigarette didn't shake

much. When I put my mind to it, I could walk without a wobble.

Division Street was quiet. The people and the cars came in the morning and the afternoon, and I'd seen traffic jams that had any big city beaten. There was a deputy sheriff, a sleepy guy named Kraft, who was supposed to worry about traffic, and sometimes the state police pitched in to help. The sheriff, Valentine Stark himself, kept himself for the brainy work, such as solving murders. That was fine. I couldn't have asked for any bloodhound I'd like better than Stark.

Wait a minute! They'd gone and got a detective in. A real cop, Hal said. How the hell did Hal know how good he was? And a cop was only a cop. He was only a human being.

"Why, hello, Frankie?" a girl said.

HER arms were full of bundles.

She'd come out of the Great Otter Food Center. Way down below me she was looking up at me with her red mouth half-open and her eyes shining. Why was I so high up? Then I had it. My head was a balloon too. Hal wasn't the only guy who could make his head float in the air.

"Don't you ever say hello to a girl?" she said.

Mary Hoppenfeld. That's who she was. If I didn't know any other way, I should know by the way her eyes shone when they looked at me. She'd looked at me like that when we were kids going on hayrides together, and later too, even after Beverly, when I'd still thought that other girls could take Beverly's place.

"Hello, Mary," I said. I started to go on.

"Frankie," she said, "haven't you anything to say to an old friend?"

What, for instance? How are you and isn't it a hot day for May? And

after that, what?

"Well—" I said.

"Why don't you come around to see me," Mary said. "Don't you like me any more?"

She had looks and a build. All I had to do was reach out my hand for her. I'd done it before, lots of times. I could do it now.

Only she wasn't Beverly. Nobody was Beverly but Beverly.

"I'm pretty busy these days," I said.

The shine went out of her eyes and her mouth got ugly. "So I've heard," she said. "Busy with Beverly Atwood. You and a couple of dozen other men."

You can't hit a woman. My right hand was clenched, but I didn't lift it because she was a woman. I went past her and my legs were wobbling again. They wobbled for a little while before I could get them to become steady.

A long, low wooden building had a row of stores in it. "DAVID REESE, REAL ESTATE," gilt letters on one of the store windows said.

Dave Reese, the guy Beverly was making dates with at the same time she was telling me she had a headache or couldn't see me for other reasons that weren't reasons. Okay, if he wanted her and she wanted him, let them get married. I could take a fair and square licking. But let him let my sister alone while he was running after Beverly. I know how it was—Rachel with him all the time in the office, and Rachel no better than Mary Hoppenfeld chasing a guy she wanted, and he, I bet, not running away. By God, I didn't have to stand for it!

I pushed the door in.

A COUPLE of years ago it had been a shoemaker's shop. Now the walls were painted tan and the floor was varnished and there were easy chairs and two desks, the one up front

Rachel's and Dave's near the back so you couldn't get to see the great real estate agent unless Rachel said it was okay.

Rachel sat at her typewriter, and Dave sat on a corner of her desk. A couple of men were there with them. One was Sheriff Stark. The other was nobody to me.

I wasn't looking for an audience. Before I had more than one foot inside I turned to go.

"There's Frank Townsend now!" Stark yelled in that high, woman's voice of his. "You wait a minute, Frank!"

I took another step and stopped. If I kept going, he'd think I was running away from him. So I went back.

"What do you want?" I said.

Dave slid off the desk. "Frank, Mr. Helm would like to meet you," he said. "He's a private detective who arrived this morning to work on the Matterson case."

"What do you want me to do," I said, "call out a band for him?"

The private cop was coming over to me. He didn't have a beard. He didn't look different from any guy you'd see in the street. But he had a pipe. He was chewing on it and looking me over, and he was smiling like he'd just thought of a good joke.

"Hello Frank," he said and stuck out his hand.

My hand went out by itself and shook his. I tried to crush his bones, but he had a good grip. The smile was pasted on him. I dropped his hand. I could see through him like a window. One of these personality boys. The idea was to make me feel he was my pal, and when I wasn't watching my step he'd give me the works.

"I was just about to look for you," he said.

"What the hell for?" I said.

"Frankie, please!" Rachel said. She leaned forward against her typewriter and gave me the look that said: Now be a good boy and don't play rough with the company.

Dave Reese put in his two cents. "Helm only wants to ask you questions because you're an important witness."

"Witness, eh?" My head wouldn't stay on my neck. It had learned that from Hal. My head was way up, looking down at all of them. "I didn't witness a damn thing," I said. "All I did was come running into the kitchen when Mrs. Jordson yelled."

Helm sucked his pipe and looked at me and then took the pipe out to speak. "I'd also like to speak to you about Mike Parker," he said.

It was the way he said it, so quiet and with only his eyes smiling at me. Like he knew many things nobody else did. Like he was telling me he'd only hit Rexton this morning and was already was ahead of everybody else there.

It got very still. Rachel had her fingers on the typewriter keys, but she wasn't typing. She just sat there looking at me, and her lips started to tremble. For all I cared, Dave Reese and Stark weren't in the room. It was between Rachel and me and the cop sucking on his pipe and waiting for me to say something.

I couldn't look at him. My head was so light and empty that there wasn't anything in it except fear. I'd been under fire. I'd been pinned down on an empty beach by Jap machine guns. But I'd never been scared like I was then.

And I was outside in the street. I didn't remember leaving the office, but there was the sun pouring down on me and my body was covered with sweat.

"Hey, you, where do you think you're going?" I heard Stark yell.

I was walking away from them. I was almost running.

"Let him go," I heard Helm say.

I knew that I had done the wrong thing. I was always doing the wrong thing. I walked slower, but I kept walking.

CHAPTER VII

Rachel Townsend

*Friday, May 16
4:40 P.M.*

HER hips will spread. Give her a year of marriage and her flesh will start to pile up. Give her a baby or two, and she'll be a big, washed-out blonde.

Oh, cut it out. What if your own figure measures the same as Venus de Milo's? Does a man chose his love with a tape measure? And if he did, wouldn't he, being a man, prefer a juicy blonde and consider you on the unvoluptuous side, if he considered you at all except as a profitable fixture in his office?

That wasn't quite fair. Phone him in the middle of the night and say, Dave, I need you, and he'll dash over to rescue you from the police. Ask him for the shirt off his back, and he'll give it to you gladly. But you can't have the one thing you want from him. You can't have a swoony look come into his face at the sound of your voice over the wire.

Beverly's call came through me, as did all calls to the office.

"Rachel, honey, how are you?" That sugar-sweet, intimate tone which made the men start to pant and which she used on women just to keep in practice.

"Busy." I could overlook the social amenities with her. She wasn't a potential client—not for me, at any rate.

"How I envy you career girls." A knife in the ribs, that career girl crack. The way she said it, it conjured up a picture of a sexless old maid with glasses and too many bones and a leaky nose. "I feel so useless being nothing but a home girl."

How did that wisecrack go? A home girl—home to anybody at all.

I waited. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of saying that Dave was right here and I'd put him on the wire. She'd have to ask.

She had something else on her mind first. "Is it true that a detective came to town this morning? I mean to work on poor Rudy's murder?"

Poor Rudy! Last week he had tried to assault her on his terrace—why a terrace of all places?—and now he was poor Rudy. I'd need proof before I'd believe that she hadn't been the one to do the assaulting.

"It's true."

"You're not very talkative today, Rachel."

"I'm over my head in work."

Beverly waited. We both waited. I'd hang on all day before I'd say that Dave was here to speak to her.

She gave in. "May I speak to Dave?"

I TURNED my head. He was bent over his desk, studying the map of the new Cook Valley development. I told him the call was for him and clicked the switch at the side of my desk. He picked up his phone and I hung up mine. He said hello, and that was when the expression came into his face I'd have given both arms to have my voice inspire. He hunched over his desk, put his mouth close against the mouthpiece, lowered his voice.

Back to work, my fleshless, bloodless, sexless secretary while I hold sweet converse with my love. I resumed typing a lease, but my brain didn't know

what my fingers were doing.

You'd tried. There was a traditional way which always worked in the movies and in magazine stories. You roused the dormant passion of the man you adored by pretending that you'd gone overboard for another man. He began by finding, to his bewilderment, that he was jealous. He ended by realizing that you were his true heart's desire. Wedding bells.

So you selected Mike Parker rather cold-bloodedly. He was a perfect stooge, a verile, handsome beast who was supposed to be quite a lad with the ladies. You went with him to a square dance at the high school gym. Dave was there with Beverly, and you bore down heavily on inspiring jealousy. Your eyes and manner demonstrated that you thought Mike something wonderful, but it was wasted on the only member of the audience who counted. To Dave you remained one of the girls in the square he had to swing in his arms for brief intervals because the routine demanded it before he could get back to his Beverly.

All you accomplished was having to fight Mike off later when he saw you home. And to make Frank, who throughout the dance had stood against a wall of the gym alternating his glowers between Dave and Mike, next day grimly defend his sister's honor by beating up Mike. And the day after that Mike was—

Don't think about that part of it. You'd promised yourself never to think about it. Keep your thoughts on your love, which has enough terror in it.

Last week you were more subtle—or thought you were. You asked Dave if you could get off early that afternoon.

"I have a date with Rudy Matterson," you told him. "He says I have one of the best figures he's ever seen. He'd like to sketch me."

Dave's eyes didn't flick over your figure to collaborate the opinion of an artist. And though knowing Rudy's reputation, especially with girls who posed for him, he wasn't in the least distressed. He merely grinned.

"What's the difference whom he uses for models for those nightmares he paints?"

You kept plugging. "He wants to paint my whole figure. I don't know if I should let him." And you tried not to blush as you said it. You sought for jealousy in his eyes, some hint that you had made the slightest breach in the wall.

Only that grin again. "If I know Matterson, you'd better take a gun along with you. Go ahead, Rachel, but please send out the Morgan letter first."

Another blank. But you had to go to Rudy's studio because you'd made the date. You went in through the back door so Frankie wouldn't see you from the garage, and then you had your work cut out for you convincing Rudy that he had the wrong idea of why you came. It was a mess because Rudy wanted what he wanted and you got frightened. But not as frightened as days later when Rudy—

Don't ever, ever think about *that*. If you have to think, think of Dave speaking on the phone to the juicy blonde he loved.

I TURNED my head to look at him. He wasn't aware that I was in the office, that I existed. Haggard lines were etched about his eyes and mouth. They'd been there for weeks; they'd got deeper in the last few days. Beverly had done that to him, the way she had done worse to Frank. She was like the female praying mantis who devours the males who love her.

He spoke louder now, excitedly. "There's no reason to worry because a

detective is on the case. I'm sure your father couldn't have— . . . I know you didn't say that, but then why are you worried? . . . Frank?" His voice dropped, but I wasn't so far away that I couldn't hear if I strained. "I'm not Frank's lawyer. And if he did kill—" He glanced up at me as if startled to see me there in his office where I worked, and turned his back to me.

I had to do it. I opened a drawer in my desk and leaned over as if searching for something, and at the same time I put my phone to my ear. If he turned suddenly, he wouldn't see me listening in.

Dave's voice was a dull, metallic whisper. "Why should you be so upset because Frank might be the one?"

"Honey, I keep telling you that Frankie means nothing to me. But I couldn't stand if it Frankie killed him because Rudy tried to—well, you know what happened on his terrace last week, and Frankie might have found out, and you know Frankie's temper. And if it wasn't Frankie who did it, but—but—"

"But your father?" Dave's voice was so tight that I wouldn't have recognized it.

"No! I can't believe it!"

"Neither can I, so get it out of your head."

"Honey, can you come right over? I feel so frantic. I need your arms about me."

By an effort of will, I kept myself from slamming the phone on the hook. I hung up softly.

I was typing when Dave came to the side of my desk and stopped. His hat was on his head. He shouldn't cover that thick, unruly hair, worn as carelessly as a boy's. His face was a boy's too, freckled and guileless and snub-nosed. It was a face you wanted to press to you while you ran a hand through his hair. But now he was a

boy grown old all at once, the lines pulling his mouth down and the fresh clearness of his eyes fading.

"I'm knocking off for the day." He spoke mechanically, a boss giving his secretary orders. He looked at his watch. "Twenty to five. You can close up before six if you want to."

"There's enough work to keep me busy." He needn't worry. I'd keep his business running while he held her in his arms.

"Yes. Well." He didn't go. He stood looking down at me. "Rachel?" "Yes?"

"Frank was drunk. He wasn't responsible for what he did."

My fingers were claws on the typewriter keys. "Did?" I whispered.

"The way he didn't want to answer the detective's questions and walked out. He was obviously drunk."

"I suppose so."

"Sure he was." He put on his hat. "So long."

THE door closed. It would serve him right to have Mrs. Atwood for a mother-in-law. He'd find out soon enough that he'd married two wives.

Through the window I saw him get into his car. Then he was gone.

Thank God for work. Thank God for Mr. MacDougall who kept me occupied making a dozen phone calls to find out if the Board of Supervisors would grant him a zoning variance in the Woodmere section. Thank God for Mrs. Norton who was having plumbing trouble and thought we were responsible because we'd handled the sale of the house to her. But Mrs. Norton exhausted her indignation and left, and I was alone and it was only twenty-five to six.

I fled that office.

"Through for the day, Miss Townsend?"

The detective materialized at my side as I turned the key in the lock.

My fingers dropping the key into my handbag were stiff and cold, but I couldn't let him guess that he bothered me in the least. "Don't tell me, Mr. Helm, that you've been wasting the county's money shadowing me?"

"Hardly. I think I've been earning my pay." A finger trailed along the zipper of a leather briefcase under his arm. Was that where he kept the clues detectives were supposed to collect like windblown apples? "May I walk you home?"

He didn't ask if I generally walked home or if I lived close enough to walk. He seemed to know. There was a quiet assurance about him that wasn't good for my nerves.

Ben Helm fell into step beside me. The questions I tensed myself against didn't come. He made light conversation about Rexton, real estate, and the weather. I kept glancing sideways at him. You expected a detective to be pouchy and hard-boiled. This one was youthfully slender and flat at the stomach, though he was at least in his late thirties and was losing his hair. He had nice brown eyes and the kind of mouth that smiled easily and a thin patrician nose. He looked like a man with whom a girl would enjoy going to a dance.

All the same, he was a manhunter.

We were turning up Ivy Lane when he ceased to be a gallant gentleman escorting a lady home. Even then he seemed to be appealing to me only for help. "I'm having trouble obtaining background material on Matterson."

"You sound as if you're writing a story about him."

"In effect, yes. I can't draw deductions from people unless I know the essentials about them."

"I was under the impression that de-

tectives drew deductions from clues."

"There are also psychological clues. What do you know about Matterson?"

A HUNDRED feet ahead the cottage nestled at the side of the road. Part of my mind noticed that during the day Frankie had cut the lawn. Nobody had ever been able to say of him that he was lazy or shiftless.

"I hardly knew Matterson," I told him. "He kept to himself a great deal. He was a lone wolf."

"With emphasis on the wolf."

It was a spot for a smile, and I gave it to him. "And you said you had trouble getting background material."

"That much was easy, though it's hard to tell what isn't just gossip. I don't suppose you can give me anything definite?"

"No."

We were at the door of the cottage. I fished out my key and waited. It was his move.

Ben Helm looked at the clipped lawn, at first one and then the other of the two red maples standing like sentinels on either side of the cottage, at the royal blue window trim bright in the sunlight. He delivered an opinion. "Cozy. Do you own the house?"

Did a detective have to know everything? "I rent it. Would you like to come in?"

He would come in anyway, and I preferred that the suggestion come from me. He responded as if I were conferring a favor on him and followed me.

Frankie had made up the daybed on which he slept in the living room. I needn't have worried; he was neat as a pin. There was only one bedroom and that was mine as the female and more permanent occupant.

Ben Helm paused just inside the doorway. His head did not turn or his eyes move in their sockets, but I had a

feeling that he was looking for something. For Frankie? But if he had hoped to find Frankie here, why hadn't he come here directly instead of waiting to walk with me?

I remember that I was the hostess—at least that it was my home and that he was supposedly my guest. "Would you like a highball?"

"No, thanks."

I SAT down at the table. Everything that happened now was up to him. He crossed the room and arranged himself in the armchair, placing his briefcase across his knees. Then he looked at me. His gaze wasn't that of a detective studying a suspect, but of a man hungrily taking in a woman's face and figure. I'd always blushed too easily. I turned my head to hide the blood I felt rushing to my cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Miss Townsend. That was rude. But you remind me so much of my wife."

Give me a bullying, roughneck detective every time instead of a gentlemanly one with an ingratiating manner and a technique of taking his time until your nerves are raw. "Spare me the soft-soap. What are you after?"

My outburst bounced off him. "I mean it, Miss Townsend. You're very much like Greta. You've her black hair and black eyes, and you carry yourself in the same proud way." He fumbled with his tobacco pouch, and his voice became remote. "I haven't seen her in nine weeks. That's one disadvantage of being married to an actress."

"Greta Helm?" I murmured. "An actress?"

"Greta Murdock. That's her stage name." He shook his head. "You've never heard of her. She's never been on the screen and has had only minor parts on Broadway. Usually she acts

in stock. That's where she is now, on the west coast. I wish she'd quit and stay home."

You can't fear a lonely man hungering for his wife. Because you know how it is to hunger for the one you love. You wouldn't mind if he cried on your shoulder, and perhaps you would find a measure of comfort crying on his.

"About Mike Parker."

I didn't quite jump, but a firecracker exploded under me wouldn't have shaken me more. There it was suddenly, without warning, without transition. Mike Parker.

"You must be able to tell me something about Mike Parker. You knew him well." He said it casually, as if it weren't very important.

"I went out with him only once in my life." My tone was apologetic. It annoyed me.

"And your brother beat him up."

"What's it your business? Mike killed himself accidentally long before Rudolph Matterson was murdered."

"I fully realize that Parker couldn't have murdered Matterson." The tone was dry with sarcasm. The brown eyes lay flatly on me, without warmth now.

Be careful, I thought. Be so very careful of this sweet, horrible man.

"Then what's it your business?" I repeated. "The county is paying you to find who murdered Matterson."

"Uh-huh. I propose to earn it, Miss Townsend."

THAT was when Frankie came out of the bedroom.

He had been in there all the time, listening to us. He strode to my chair with his head down and his very wide shoulders hunched. Then he stopped beside me and glared at the detective.

Ben Helm's eyes became amused. I'd already decided that you couldn't tell anything about him from what you saw

in his eyes. "Has he anything to hide? Or have you?"

"I heard you ask her about Mike Parker." Frankie was cold sober, but he sounded uglier than if he had been drunk. "Like she told you, what's that got to do with Mr. Matterson?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Yeah? Well, why don't you find out from the coroner's inquest? The jury said Mike dropped his shotgun and it went off and killed him by accident."

Ben Helm opened his briefcase. I stood up and Frankie slipped an arm about my shoulders. It was, I thought, as if we were clinging to each other as we watched Ben Helm take out a folder of typed papers.

"This is the transcript of the inquest. I've been reading it. On Sunday morning, April 6th, the day Parker was murdered, you were near the scene of the crime."

"So what? I was fishing a couple of miles away."

"You objected to Parker going with your sister."

"So what the hell does that mean? Mike was killed by accident. Those papers you got tell you the whole thing."

"Uh-huh." Ben Helm applied a match to his pipe. We waited silently, tensely, for him to draw a light. Then he smiled at me. "I was in Matterson's studio this afternoon. His paintings fascinated me. He had considerable talent."

It made me feel better to let him have a touch of sarcasm. "So our detective is also an authority on art?"

"I know enough about it to know that Matterson was fair with oils, even those his stuff irritated me, and he certainly could draw. Like these sketches."

He dug again into his briefcase and pulled out a sketch pad. Frantically I wanted to move away from Frankie

then, but I couldn't without struggling out of the circle of his arm. Ben Helm rose lightly to his feet and dropped the pad on the table where Frankie and I could see it. I didn't have to look at it to know that on the top page there was one of the sketches Rudy had drawn of me last week.

Frankie was very still.

I felt that I had to say something or come apart. "He was in my office one afternoon and sketched me."

Ben Helm turned the page. "Did he sketch this in your office?"

That one showed my shoulders as well as my face, and my shoulders were bare.

Frankie made a sound in his throat. His arm dropped from me. I glanced at him then, and he was staring down at the pad with hard and bitter eyes.

I forced words past my constricted throat. "Frankie, I didn't pose for him. I mean, not like that. I was wearing my yellow pique dress with the shoulder straps. All he did was sketch my shoulders without drawing in the straps."

FRANKIE looked at me, his eyes on me and not seeing me, and then he looked again at the pad. He turned a page. There were no more sketches of me, of course; there had been only those two. The next page was blank.

"Some pages could have been torn out," Ben Helm said.

He was a devil. How had Shakespeare said it? A man can smile and smile and be a villain. He had worked up to this. He had walked home with me on the chance that Frankie would be here, intending all along to confront us with the sketch pad in the hope that Frankie or I would do something or say something to give us away.

But right now he wasn't as important as Frankie. I had to convince my

brother.

"Frankie, listen to me. I went to Rudy's studio only to make Dave jealous. All that happened was that Rudy drew those two sketches of me. There was no harm in that. I knew I could take care of myself. I guess it was stupid. Dave didn't get jealous. He can't see anybody but that—"

I broke off, breathing hard. I'd said too much. I must learn to keep my mouth shut when the manhunter was within earshot.

Frankie patted my shoulder. There were times when he could be kind and understanding, the way a girl wanted her brother to be. "Sure, Rachel, Mr. Matterson told me all about it. He didn't have anything to hide about you being in his studio, so he told me."

"Uh-huh. So, Miss Townsend, you hardly knew Matterson?" Ben Helm's voice came at me like the edge of a chisel. "But you went to his studio for him to sketch you."

"The fact that I was in his studio for half an hour doesn't make me an authority on his personal history. That was what you said you wanted to know about him."

"And why were you going to see him the night he was murdered?"

I looked down and saw one of Frankie's big hands clench. I looked up quickly, facing the detective squarely. "I was on my way to visit my brother. And it was at least an hour after—after it happened."

Ben Helm turned away from me as if he'd had enough of me and was disgusted. He picked up the sketch pad from the table and flicked back the page to the sketch in which my shoulders were bare. "Which one of you is trying to cover up for the other?" He

said it musingly, without directing the question to either of us.

Frankie took a step forward. "Get out before I push your face in!"

Ben Helm looked him over curiously. "Still anxious to use your fists on any face available. What have you got against the world?"

"Get out!"

Ben Helm nodded. "It's your house. There are two ways to run away from me—the second by kicking me out of your house."

"I don't run from anybody. Get out!"

I stood huddled within myself, watching the detective shove the sketch pad and the typed pages back into his briefcase. Then he flashed that warm, open smile which had become so hateful and he left.

I LISTENED to the door close behind him, but still I couldn't quite breathe. I glanced at my brother. He was unclenching his hands. He looked at them as if in surprise that they belonged to him and pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"What's for supper?" he asked kindly.

It was too much. If he had roared at me or had tried to strike me, I could have taken it more easily. I started to sob.

He put his arms about me and held me against his deep chest. "Don't let that fly-cop bother you, Rachel."

"It's not that," I sobbed. "It's not that at all."

It was everything.

CHAPTER VIII Ben Helm

*Friday, May 16
8:30 P. M.*

THE County building was a two-story frame gingerbread affair. It had been a large residential house, very old, very dignified, set in an acre of lawn and massive elms. The first floor was now a courtroom and the upstairs bedrooms were offices.

The place had the hush of public buildings at night. A sickly light showed me the way across the cramped lobby. A flight of morbidly creaking stairs took me up to a long corridor. A glow against a glazed window revealed the district attorney's office. At one time it must have been a spacious master bedroom; now it was an overcrowded office without a chair to relax in except the one behind the glass-topped desk.

I had been here this morning, very briefly, borne from the railroad station by Sheriff Stark to meet District Attorney Kenneth Fleet. Fleet had been in a hurry—an important engagement, he'd informed me in the manner of a man to whom important engagements were always happening. Then he'd explained to Stark that I was to be sworn in as a deputy sheriff to give me official standing. Then he'd told me that he hoped I would be able to get along without him for a while, but hadn't sounded optimistic. Then he'd hustled off.

Here I was again, at eight-thirty P.M. Fleet's phone call had interrupted my dinner at the rooming house where Stark had settled me. Any progress to report? A little. Well, suppose I came right to his office and report it. I could have made it in twenty minutes. I took an hour.

"We've been waiting for you, Helm," Fleet said.

I moved forward to the plain wooden chair nearest his desk and took out my tobacco pouch. Fleet stuck a cigar into his fat face and leaned back in his red leather desk chair. Stark clamped bony knees which extended straight out from

his chair like a school girl's.

"Any progress?" Fleet demanded when he had his cigar lit.

I pressed tobacco into the pipe bowl with my pinky and looked the district attorney over. Fleet was a plump, middle-aged man in a blue serge suit and a high, white collar. He probably was kind to his wife and children and liked by his neighbors. But he was a politician, which meant that he considered his pond too small for a frog his size. The smaller the pond, the bigger the inferiority complex, and Cagula County was a very small pond. I was an investigator from the big time. I might or might not be much, but I was from the big time, so it was necessary to his ego to make clear to me that he was the boss and I the hired help.

"Progress," I said, "is what the police tell newspapers they're making when they're up a tree."

"Call it what you want to. Have you got anywhere?"

"How do I know at this point?" I said. "Before I set myself up as a private detective, I was on the Coast City Homicide Squad. Our crime detection was as modern as that of any city in the country. We had manpower and experience. Yet a depressing lot of murders remained unsolved in our books."

"And this is a small, poor county with only a sheriff and a deputy for a police force. And our state police—" Fleet's cigar seemed suddenly tasteless, but it wasn't the cigar. "Traffic cops!" he snorted. "They came around after Matterson was murdered and took a quick look and dusted the kitchen and the bean pot for fingerprints and went back to chasing speeders." Obviously the state was run by the wrong party. "No, we haven't much police organization. What can a district attorney do without investigation assistance? That's why I recommended that you be hired."

"We don't ask for miracles," Sheriff Stark added brightly. Then he looked anxiously at Stark to see if miracles were what the county was paying me for.

"By no means," Fleet agreed graciously, "All we ask is that you do a job to the best of your ability."

"Uh-huh," I said, "now that it's understood that there's no money-back guarantee."

FLEET'S plump face couldn't decide whether to frown or be amused. It dipped to the desk. "I suppose you know that the inquest was held yesterday. I've been after Mrs. Bookman to type out the transcript in a hurry." He reached the papers across his desk.

They were patiently silent while I read. There was little in the transcript that Stark hadn't already told me. The only one with real police experience to testify was a state police sergeant who said that one of the tea cups and saucers found on the kitchen table appeared to have been wiped clean and that whatever other fingerprints he'd found either belonged in the room or weren't, as should be expected in a busy kitchen, readable. At the end of a dozen pages the jury found that Rudolph Matterson had been murdered by the usual party or parties unknown. At that, it was a step forward. They could as easily have decided that Matterson had stumbled against the wall and the beanpot had fallen on his head.

"What's the good of it?" I tossed the transcript back on the desk. "Nothing was brought out at the inquest that couldn't have been obtained more effectively through private questioning. And the person who ran the inquest isn't a doctor or a cop or a lawyer. I understand that he's very good at repairing automobiles."

"Ben doesn't think much of coro-

ners," Stark explained helpfully to Fleet.

"I'm talking about the system," I said. "If I wanted to murder somebody, I'd steer clear of places like New York or Coast City where they have medical examiners and laboratories and trained homicide specialists from the beginning of a case to the end."

Fleet's pudgy fingers tapped his desk. I was rapidly making him dislike me. What the hell? They said they didn't expect miracles, but that wasn't what they meant. They'd got their idea of private detectives from fiction, and who ever heard of one failing in a book? I knew small towns. If they had to spend money, they preferred it to end up in their own pockets, or be sure of full value received.

"You mention that even Coast City murders are unsolved," Fleet reminded me sourly.

"But not practically all of them. And they're able to recognize murder when they see it." I opened my briefcase and tossed the transcript of another inquest on his desk. "The sheriff gave me this to read. It's the Mike Parker inquest."

Fleet's eyes slid sideways to Stark. Stark shifted in his seat. "I figured he ought to read it, Ken," he said apologetically.

Fleet transferred his disapproving gaze to me. His cigar was a stubby rod in a corner of his mouth. He didn't remove it to speak. "You were brought here for a specific purpose, Helm—to find, or try to find, Matterson's murderer."

I grinned. "We were discussing the coroner system. Parker was found dead with his chest full of buckshot. There was no autopsy."

"A reputable physician examined the body," Fleet countered coldly. "A shell in his bolt action repeater shotgun had been fired. There was no doubt

that the buckshot which killed him came from that gun. His body lay across the barrel and his shoulder on a jagged rock. What happened was clear. He stumbled and dropped his gun on the rock and it went off and killed him."

"Smart gun." I put a fresh light to my pipe. "Was the angle of entry of the buckshot determined? Was that particular gun dropped repeatedly on the rock to see if a sudden jar would set it off?"

STARK sat on the edge of his chair. His slack mouth hung open and his negligible chin wasn't in sight. He saw me looking at him and closed his mouth and nodded eagerly.

"We're not as incompetent as you like to think," Fleet said. "The state police dusted the gun for fingerprints."

"And found smudges. What did you expect? The killer wouldn't have grabbed it by the barrel, which is about the only place where a gun might show readable prints."

"You said killer." The creases of Fleet's face worked themselves into a smirk. "Does a trained detective make up his mind without evidence?"

I waved my pipe at Stark. "The sheriff gave me the transcript of the Parker inquest. He must have had a reason."

Stark's tongue moved slowly over his lips. "Well, the safety was off the gun. Mike Parker went only a couple of hundred feet up the path from the highway. It was a mile or better before he'd reach anything to shoot at." He paused and then said determindly: "The safety was off."

"I get the idea," Fleet said. "The safety was off. If it hadn't been, Parker wouldn't have shot himself when he dropped the gun. He wasn't the first hunter who paid for his carelessness."

"Frank Townsend." Stark blurted

the name as if afraid somebody would stop him. When nobody made anything of it, he went on. "Well, Frank had that fight with Mike. Because Mike went with Frank's sister Rachel, and Mike's got a bad reputation with women. Frank said he was fishing in Edgeman's Pond when it happened. Well, there wasn't anybody seen him fishing. And Frank's got a terrible temper, so—" He spread his hands palms up and looked hopeful.

"My God, Val, I had that out with you," Fleet said. "Parker's body was on the gun."

"Well, say the killer stuck the gun under Mike after he shot him." Stark appealed to me. "It could be."

The sheriff was not a genius, but he was not a fool either. He only looked it.

"It could be," I agreed. "Easier than that he was walking along a path where there was no hunting, with a loaded shotgun and the safety catch off, and that he dropped it and that it went off with the muzzle tilted at the precise angle to fill his chest with buckshot."

FLEET removed his cigar and rolled it between his fingers. "You may be as smart as they say, Helm, but don't get the idea that I don't know my job. Do you imagine that Parker would've let Townsend, with whom he'd had a fight a couple of days before, come up to him in the woods and take his shotgun from him? Townsend had licked Parker once, but Parker was no weakling. He could've put up quite a scrap. There was no sign of violence on Parker's body other than the buckshot. No sign that he'd been slugged from behind. No sign of a struggle in the immediate area."

Stark's throat made a rumbling sound. When Fleet and I looked at him, he squirmed. "Well, say another

gun killed Mike," he offered diffidently. "Then the killer shot off Mike's gun in the air and stuck it under Mike's body." He squirmed some more, then added doggedly: "Nobody could never tell that another shotgun killed Mike. You can't trace buckshot like bullets. I told you, Ken, but you wouldn't listen."

Fleet spread his fingers on the edge of his desk and froze in that pose. I knew how it was. Particularly in a small community, the coroner was the district attorney's stooge and at an inquest the jury almost always followed the coroner's lead. An accidental death closed a case immediately and satisfactorily. It eliminated dull, plodding sleuthing and the odds-on chance of an unsolved case to mar a district attorney's record.

"You told me, Val," Fleet said testily after a silence. "And I told you that there still wasn't a scrap of evidence against him."

I heaved a sigh, "You're backing into the problem. You can't go after a murderer until you've decided that there's been murder."

"Helm, you're here only to work on the Matterson case."

"Uh-huh. That's what I'll do if you don't put walls around me," I said.

Bleakly Fleet's eyes sighted me along his cigar. Stark sat perched on his wooden chair like a baseball spectator watching a pitch with three and two on the batter and bases loaded. I blew smoke at the ceiling.

"What's up your sleeve, Helm?" Fleet demanded.

"Nothing that hasn't been out in the open for anybody to look at. We've looked at how Mike Parker died. Now let's look at the Matterson murder. According to the reconstruction of the crime—"

"My reconstruction. The coroner used my words to sum up at the inquest.

Nobody has found fault with it." Fleet jutted his jaw, daring me to find fault with it.

"It's a good reconstruction," I said. "Matterson was reading in the living room when somebody came up on his terrace and attracted his attention by tapping on the window. Almost immediately after Matterson admitted his visitor, he took him—or her—into the kitchen for tea. When Matterson rose from the table for some reason and turned his back, he got the bean pot over his head. Then the killer took a kitchen towel and wiped his cup and saucer."

"Wiped only the cup and saucer," Stark muttered. "Funny."

"One of three reasons why he didn't do a better job of eliminating possible prints," I said. "He may have been a member of the household, in which case his prints on anything but the cup and saucer wouldn't matter. He may have known that readable prints aren't easily left, in spite of stories to the contrary, except on smooth, clean surfaces on which a finger is carefully pressed. He may have been simply careless and lucky, which I consider most likely. But to get back to the reconstruction—I concede that what evidence there is backs it up."

"So?" Fleet said.

"My chief objection is that the killer came to see Matterson with murder in his heart. In a murder plan it is essential to get the victim off beyond possible witnesses. But here was a house full of servants, any of whom might pop out at any moment."

"Are you saying that the crime was not premeditated?" Fleet asked dryly. He hadn't his murderer yet—if he ever would have—but he was already thinking in terms of a first degree indictment.

"It was premeditated in the legal sense of a lucid interval before the com-

mission of the crime," I said. "But not an interval of more than a few minutes at the most. I can't see that set-up selected in advance for a murder, and I can't see a bean pot as a weapon chosen after careful deliberation. It's like a brick or a milk bottle or a poker, something that becomes a weapon only because it's the nearest thing at hand. While they were drinking tea, Matterson said something that caused the visitor to decide to murder him. By that time the visitor knew that the servants were all upstairs; Matterson must have mentioned it while preparing the tea himself. And there was that heavy bean pot right on the table. Matterson would suspect no danger, even if he saw the visitor pick it up. What harm is there in a bean pot? Matterson didn't remain alive long enough to find out."

THOUGHTFULLY Fleet rolled his cigar between his lips. "Possibly you are right," he conceded. "But it's a minor point. I don't see where it changes anything."

"Mike Parker," Stark blurted.

"What's that?" Fleet gave him a sidelong glance.

"Mike Parker." Stark nervously massaged his bony knees and plunged. "That's how Mike was killed too. I mean by somebody he knew well. Somebody met Mike on the path. Said: 'That's a nice gun you got. Let's have a look at it.' Mike, he was proud of his gun. He liked to show it off. So he handed it over and the other person turned it around and shot him. Ain't that what you got in mind, Ben?"

"Something like that," I said. "I doubt if Parker's murder was planned in advance either. It would have been too subtle, too elaborate. It would have meant knowing that Parker would go hunting that morning and where and

that he would take that path and at what time and that he would be alone. I'm inclined to believe that the killer just happened to meet Parker, or that the killer was driving along the highway when he saw Parker step into the woods and called to him and walked a short distance up the path with him. They talked, and Parker said something that made his death necessary to the killer. But Parker didn't know it, any more than did Matterson weeks later. He trusted the person he was talking to. He saw no danger in handing the other person his gun."

"The same man or woman in both cases?" Fleet said. "Is that your idea, Helm?"

"Uh-huh."

Fleet grunted. "So that's your connection between the two cases! But what have you got to back it up?"

I said, "Not much, I'm afraid, but something," and opened my briefcase. When my fingers touched the sketch pad, I hesitated.

A few hours ago I'd pulled a dirty trick on the two Townsends. It hadn't even worked, which deprived it of justification. I could still see the expression on Rachel's face when I had shown her brother the sketches, and for a long time I'd feel like a heel.

What the hell, I was a cop. My profession was to hurt people, most of whom deserved hurting, though not all. Okay, I was a cop, even an official one again now that Stark had sworn me in as a deputy sheriff.

I PULLED the sketch pad out of the briefcase and went to the desk and placed it down in front of Fleet. "This is what the sheriff and I found this afternoon in Matterson's studio."

Stark left his chair and came to the side of the desk. For a little while the three of us brooded wordlessly at

the pretty face on paper, though two of us had seen the sketch before. Then I reached over and turned the page to reveal the second sketch—the one in which Matterson had omitted to draw in the shoulder straps of the dress, according to her story.

"Rachel Townsend," Fleet muttered. "Strange that we didn't find this when we searched the studio the night of the murder."

"Maybe because it was on the table," I observed.

Fleet let that lay. Five minutes ago he would have bristled. He pushed his chair back and nodded slowly.

"Yes, I see the possible connection. She was Parker's girl friend and you've just proved that she posed for Matterson. But does that necessarily mean Frank Townsend?"

"It sure does." Stark spoke up vigorously for once. His pet theory at last had something to back it up. "Frank, he beat up Mike for going with his sister Rachel. Say Mike didn't stop seeing her, so Frank killed him. Then there was Mr. Matterson. Rachel let him draw her picture in the studio. Frank found out, and on top of that he found out Mr. Matterson tried to get fresh with Beverly Atwood. That made two things against him, so Frank killed him too. Did it the same way both times, like Ben said, just talking friendly like and then all at once letting them have it." And he actually beamed at me.

I said: "Would Parker have handed his loaded gun to a man he'd had a fight with the day before?"

"Could be. Say Frank talked Mike into being friends again."

I tried it from another angle. "Would Matterson invite his chauffeur in for tea and then serve him?"

"Yeah, that bothered me too," Stark said. "Had a talk with Jerry Follette

and Mrs. Jordson. Yesterday that was, after the inquest. They said Mr. Matterson was a real democratic boss, not like lots of rich men. They said he wouldn't think nothing of inviting his help to have tea with him. So it was Frank, all right."

"Nuts!" I returned to my chair and crossed my legs.

"I agree—nuts!" Fleet said. He was picking up the pieces of his pride, re-establishing himself as the brains of Cagula County. "For that matter, we could make out an abstract cast that Rachel Townsend is the guilty party. Parker threw her over and Matterson preferred another woman, and add that to the fact that I caught her on Matterson's grounds shortly after the murder. That must have occurred to you, Helm."

I nodded. "A lot occurred to me. If we don't like either of the Townsends, we can try David Reese. Maybe he loves Rachel and goes about knocking off her boy friends. Or George Atwood who gave an unsatisfactory explanation of why he was outside Matterson's house on or about the time of the murder. Or take your pick of a dozen other variations. We could play this game all night."

"Exactly," Fleet agreed. "At this stage it's a game. Val, how many times do I have to tell you that what we need is evidence? All this talk has got us exactly nowhere."

Stark startled us with a voice that had a sneer in it. "We got somewhere. Ben here as good as made you admit that Mike Parker was murdered."

Fleet leaned over his desk to crush out the ragged remnants of his cigar. He worked at it for quite a while; there was something furious in the way his fingers tore it shred from shred. Then he looked up at me, his face heavy and his eyes cagy.

"I admit nothing," he declared. "I concede that you have made a connection, Helm, even though a tenuous one. And I am ready to go along with your notion that the inquest botched the cause of Parker's death."

The *inquest* botched it.

"Uh-huh," I said.

He gave me a quick, blank look and then dropped his gaze to the sketch pad. "Is there anything else?"

"The same thing as when I came in here," I said. "I don't care for walls around me. I want elbow room."

"You'll get it." Fleet stood up. Business was over for the night. "We have plenty of work cut out for us."

"Uh-huh," I said.

CHAPTER IX

George Atwood

Saturday, May 17
2:00 P.M.

DURING the winter leaves had collected against the base of the hedge. Immediately after lunch I raked them out to the driveway and set fire to them. Kathryn was puttering in a flower garden on the other side of the house.

A strange man sauntered up the street and turned into my driveway.

"Mr. Atwood?" he inquired.

"Yes?"

"I'm investigating the Matterson murder."

I turned to rake more leaves on the fire, although the smoldering mound was already too large for safety. Then I turned back to him. "You must be Ben Helm. I have heard of you."

Grinning, he removed a pipe from one pocket and a pouch from another. As he filled his pipe, he looked about.

"This is what I'd like," he observed

somewhat wistfully. "A cozy home of my own and me raking leaves on a Saturday afternoon and my wife planting flowers and a child or two in the house."

From where we stood Kathryn was not visible. He must have noticed her when he had passed the other side of the house.

"You are married, Mr. Helm?" I asked merely to bear my share of the conversation. I was not certain, however, that this was a conversation. It seemed to me that he was like a boxer feeling out an opponent before determining on a plan of combat.

"My wife is an actress and away a lot, so we haven't much of a home life, if any," he replied. "I envy men like you who have a permanent place to hang their hats and families that actually live with them."

He could not know that my home was not a home and that within my family I was a stranger.

Couldn't he know? It was the occupation of a detective to know or learn. Was he mocking me because he knew? I tried to look into his face, but we were on opposite sides of the fire and a smoke smudge was between us. I stepped around the fire.

Helm tossed his match on the leaves. "Mr. Atwood, where were you going Tuesday night at about ten-fifteen when Frank Townsend saw you?"

This was better. One knew where one stood when a policeman acted like a policeman.

"I believe that I answered that question at the inquest and before," I responded stiffly. "I was on my way to visit Matterson. When I was almost at the house, I changed my mind and returned."

"Did you go in through the front entrance and take the flagstone path which branches off to the house from

the head of the driveway?"

"Naturally. Do you imagine that I climbed over the hedge?"

"There is a break through the hedge at the rear of the property, near the back door of the studio."

MY HANDS tightened on the handle of the bamboo rake. This was not a third-degree in which a glaring light was directed into the eyes of a suspect, nor was this individual before me the fleshy, witless, stolid brute one expects a detective to be. I was standing on my driveway on a pleasant Saturday afternoon and speaking with an affable, well-spoken man who might have been one of the brighter young teachers in my school. But at the same time I knew that this was a third-degree and that this man was in his own way more menacing than a bully with a rubber club.

"Let me anticipate you," I said. "The front entrance to the Matterson house is only four or five hundred feet from here. The back entrance through the hedge would require walking several times that distance. In your opinion, if I took the trouble to walk the additional distance, it would indicate that I was bent on a sinister purpose. For your information, I entered and departed the way a social caller would, through the front entrance, which is also the nearest entrance."

A leaf flared at Helm's feet. He kicked it toward the fire. "Don't try to out-smart me, Mr. Atwood."

"I merely anticipated what you—"

"You didn't," he interrupted me. "Here's the picture. You entered through the front and went part way to the house."

"Almost to the terrace."

"And then you changed your mind about visiting Matterson and returned home. Right?"

"Yes."

"No, Mr. Atwood," he said. "That wasn't the way it happened."

The mound of leaves was now in flames and I felt acute heat on the side of my body. But I did not move away; I waited where I was in a state of suspended animation for the detective to continue.

"This morning I was up in the apartment above the garage," he said. "I should have thought of it yesterday, but I didn't. I found a comfortable apartment—two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, bathroom. It was a home for a caretaker and his family, but hardly for a bachelor chauffeur, and obviously most of the rooms hadn't been occupied in some time. I went to see Frank Townsend. He said that because the apartment was too big for him, he'd closed up the bedrooms and had lived and slept in the living room. He didn't use the kitchen either because he took all his meals in the house. Try anticipating me now."

SUDDENLY I saw that his somewhat beaked, thin nose and tight mouth made him look like a bird of prey. But I could not follow the direction of his flight or what it meant to me.

"The point is," he resumed, "that the two bedrooms face the main house. The house and front walk aren't visible from the living room or bathroom, and Townsend told me that he was in the living room when he saw you."

I remembered. I had been beyond the house, between the house and the studio, when lights had gone on in windows above the garage. Again I was aware of the heat of the fire; I moved several steps away from it, and suddenly I was cold.

"Well, Mr. Atwood?"

I compelled myself to look him straight in the eye. "Frank must have

told you in which direction he had observed me walk."

"Toward the house, he says."

"And the time was ten-fifteen or ten-twenty," I pointed out. "That scarcely left time for me to have tea with Mat-terson, let alone murder him, before his body was discovered ten minutes later."

"Assuming that Townsend was right about the time. He admits that he didn't look at a watch. And assuming that he's not trying to cover up for you. I hear he's sweet on your daughter, which would give him reason for saying he saw you go toward the house instead of away from it."

I leaned on the rake. There was a sound of bamboo cracking; I released the pressure of my weight.

"Now we're back to where you tried to anticipate me," the detective drove at me in his quiet, almost negligent tone. "You admitted there would be something fishy if you'd gone all the way around to the back of the hedge to enter the place, or if you had left that way."

"I came and left through the front," I muttered.

"And what were you doing beyond the house when you claim you went only halfway up to the house?"

Smoke shifted in my direction and stung my eyes. I closed them. "I came from the studio," I said wearily.

"Uh-huh." It did not appear to be startling information to him. "How soon did you leave after you put the studio lights out?"

I was not so distraught that I did not recognize the trap. He must have known that no lights had gone on in the studio; Frank, driving up to the garage, or at least one of the servants in the house, would have noticed if the studio had been illuminated at that late hour.

"I had forgotten something in the

studio during a previous visit. A—a fountain pen. The moon was bright; I did not find it necessary to put on a light."

HELM scratched his chin with the bit of his pipe. "You preferred to lay yourself open to suspicion of murder rather than say you'd gone for a fountain pen. You preferred to lie about it under oath at the inquest. I refuse to believe that you're an idiot, Mr. Atwood."

I wasn't clever enough to cope with him. I could only stand there beside the fire, naked and defenseless.

"I was in Matterson's studio yesterday with the sheriff," he said reflectively, "but if I noticed burned matches on the floor I didn't pay attention to them. That's what comes of being the kind of sleuth who doesn't snoop for physical clues. I guess it's because I used to be on a big city homicide squad and left hunting for clues to the laboratory boys. But a little while ago I went back to the studio and found the burned matches. They made a trail completely around the walls of the studio, under the pictures."

What could I say?

"You didn't want it known at the time that you were in Matterson's studio," he continued. "You looked at the pictures by match-light. What did you expect to find in those pictures, Mr. Atwood?"

Couldn't he leave me one shred of self-respect? Couldn't he bring rubber hoses and glaring lights and beat me and torture me, but leave my soul unexposed? I could not answer him to save my life.

"If you could find a face in those pictures that resembled a human being, you were better than I, Mr. Atwood. Though, of course, I haven't yet seen your daughter."

I had to do something, anything, as a substitute for speech. I picked up the bamboo rake and turned to the fire—and at the head of the driveway I saw Kathryn stand with the garden claw in her hand.

I had no idea how long she had been there. When she saw that I saw her, she came forward.

I felt Helm move closer to me. His voice was low in my ear. "That doesn't mean that you didn't visit Matterson before or after you left the studio."

My hands felt the rake move as if by itself, pulling unburned leaves to the heart of the mound which had turned to fine gray ash. Kathryn stepped around the fire and stopped; she looked at me and past me at Helm. I was afraid of what my voice would sound like if I ventured to speak, so I did not introduce them to each other.

Helm swept off his hat. "Mrs. Atwood?" When she nodded, he explained who he was. I concentrated on the leaves I was raking and heard him ask her where she had been the night of the murder.

"I was in my room," Kathryn responded. "Often I retire early and read in bed."

"What time did you go up to your room?"

"I believe it was rather early. I do not regulate my retirement by the clock."

"Were you awake when your daughter and husband returned home?"

"I did not hear them. I must have fallen asleep before then."

"Any idea what time you fell asleep?"

"My dear Mr.— Oh, dear, I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

"Helm."

"I don't understand you policemen, Mr. Helm. Do you put so many meaningless questions to me because you get paid for the number you ask?"

I TURNED from the fire to look at Kathryn. She held the garden claw in both hands; her head was cocked, and that amused little smile of hers was on her lips.

"You may have something there, Mrs. Atwood," Helm retorted pleasantly. "I'll recommend to the detectives' union that we establish piece rates—say, a dozen questions for a dollar. Of course you're within your legal rights not to answer me."

"I am sure I have nothing to hide. I can't tell you what time I fell asleep because I don't know."

"Uh-huh." Helm glanced at the house. "Is your daughter in?"

Kathryn's back stiffened. "Surely you have no right to annoy the child." Her hands twisted on the garden claw. "Dear, can this man force himself on us like this?"

"I think he can," I muttered.

"George, you're absolutely spineless! I insist that you do something about this person." I had never before seen or heard her so upset.

"Very well!" Furiously I hurled down the rake. "Come with me, Helm. I will take you to my daughter."

I strode down the driveway with Helm at my heels.

"George," Kathryn said quietly.

I glanced back. She had not moved from in front of the fire. She stood small and trim, her hands clasped before her, like a mother waiting for her small son to behave himself. I went on to the house with Helm.

Beverly was in the living room. She sat curled on the couch, in the kittenish position of all human females, whatever their ages. When we entered, she lifted a fountain pen from a ten-cent notebook which rested on the arm of the couch. The nub of the pen went into her mouth; she chewed on it like a student pondering a difficult question

in an examination. But what she was pondering was Ben Helm, who himself was studying her like a man who at last had come upon the strange, the fascinating object for which he had been searching.

I muttered introductions. Beverly gave him an open-mouthed smile as she stuffed notebook and pen under the couch cushion beside the one on which she sat.

"Won't you be seated?" She nodded toward the armchair facing her. It seemed to me that she was as calculatedly cordial as if he were an eligible young man paying a first call on her.

Helm shifted his eyes from her to me. "May we be alone, Mr. Atwood?"

I left the room and the house. In the driveway Kathryn still stood in front of the fire.

"You're a fool!" I said. "He could have found legal reason to take Beverly to the district attorney's office and question her there instead. Would you have preferred that?"

Kathryn looked at the house and then back at me. She appeared to be considerably calmer than I was, but I could never tell what went on inside of her. "Why should that policeman want to see Beverly?"

"He has to question her as he did us, but that doesn't mean anything. Understand—it doesn't mean a thing."

The little smile returned to her lips. "Of course it doesn't dear," she observed placidly, and she moved up the driveway, back to her gardening.

I picked up the rake and resumed burning leaves.

CHAPTER X

Beverly Atwood

*Saturday, May 17
2:24 P.M.*

HE WASN'T exactly handsome, but he was nice. He looked rugged and experienced and exciting.

The minute he came into the room with Daddy I was sure he wasn't like any man I'd known. He wasn't a small-town boy like nearly all the others. He looked me over as if he knew all there was to know about women.

He seemed to be reacting to me.

I was glad I was wearing my white knit jersey Basque shirt. It was very good for my type of figure. His eyes didn't leave me as he crossed his legs and filled his pipe.

"I can see why Matterson was so eager to paint you," he said.

He was a bit too smart.

"Naturally I never permitted Rudy to paint me. What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

"I'm not sure yet, Miss Atwood."

Maybe I should have resented that. With anybody else I would have taken the attitude that he had no right to talk to me like that. But even his insults were fascinating.

"Are all detectives so fresh, Benny?" I asked him.

"Benny!"

He looked shocked, though calling him by his first name wasn't so much.

"I imagine your friends call you Benny."

"They don't if they want to remain my friends. It's Ben. And I'm to call you Beverly? Or are you Bev to your intimate friends?"

I gave him my best smile.

"Either one will do, Ben."

"Uh-huh."

He took his hat off his knees and put it on the end-table, making himself at home.

"Had your father known that Matterson tried to attack you on his terrace Friday afternoon?"

With just a few words he had spoiled

it. We seemed to be getting along so nicely.

"I never told a soul till Rudy's maid, Etta, brought it up the night he was killed," I said. "It's the sort of thing a girl prefers to keep to herself. You don't really think that Daddy could have—Why, that's absurd!"

"Is it?"

"Why, a meek, harmless little man like Daddy wouldn't hurt a fly."

"It wasn't a fly that was killed. It was a man."

I WAS sitting on my legs on the couch. I pulled my skirt over my knees.

"If that's a wise-crack, it's not funny," I said.

"It wasn't meant to be." Ben puffed contentedly on his pipe. "Tell me something about Mike Parker."

The way he leaped about, he didn't give a girl a chance to get set.

"Mike who?"

"Parker. Last month he was found in the woods shot dead with his own shotgun."

"Oh, yes, that Mike Parker," I said.

"Is there more than one?"

"I wouldn't know. The name is so common. What do you expect me to tell you about him?"

"You can start anywhere."

If he were paying a social call and discussing the weather, his tone and manner wouldn't have been different.

"I knew Mike Parker only because in a small place like Rexton everybody gets to know everybody else. If you want somebody who can really tell you about him, ask Rachel Townsend."

"How well did she know him?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't care to gossip about my friends. You'll have to ask her."

"At the moment I'm asking you."

I ran my palms slowly down my

Basque shirt. His nice brown eyes followed my hands. He was old, over thirty, I thought, and he was losing his hair, but he radiated a quiet strength that sent little hot and cold waves over me.

And he was dangerous too. He was excitingly dangerous.

"Why do you want to know anything about Mike Parker?" I asked him. "He was dead before Rudy was murdered."

"Funny how all of you give me the same line."

The phone rang. I excused myself and out to the hall.

Frankie Townsend was on the wire. He was mad.

"Listen, Beverly," he started right in without even saying hello. "I don't want any more of that headache business or saying you're busy tonight. I'm getting fed up with this run-around."

"What are you talking about, Frankie?"

"Listen. You see me tonight or I'm through. You get me? You stop giving me this run-around or I'm through."

He sounded as if he meant it.

What was a girl supposed to do? If I started seeing Frankie again, Dave Reese would hit the ceiling. As it was, I was having a hard enough time handling Dave.

It was like I'd been writing in my diary when Daddy and Ben Helm had come in:

"Well, if it has to be one or the other of course it will be Dave. I don't think I love him more than Frankie, but Dave has more to offer a girl. Sooner or later I'll have to get married and Dave is the best . . ."

Frankie was still talking.

"You kicked me around from pillar to post long enough," he was saying, sounding kind of wild. "What's the matter, can't you talk?"

"I'm listening to you, honey."

HE WAS like a child, so innocent and moral, and at the same time like an untamed animal except where women were concerned. Dave never made me feel the way Frankie did by just being with me. When Frankie kissed me the other night, it was like fainting. Only he was such a queer boy that a girl had to be careful, even about a little thing like letting him kiss her.

"Do I see you tonight?" he demanded.

"I can't tonight, honey."

The fact was that I had a date with Dave.

"There it goes again—the run-around. It was nice knowing you. So long."

"Frankie, wait!"

He didn't say anything, but he didn't hang up either. There was a silence. It was as if we were facing each other at opposite ends of the wire.

Why did men always have to complicate things so? Why did they always insist on owning a girl, body and soul?

"Honey, suppose we see each other tomorrow?" I suggested, making my voice soft and cozy.

"Why not tonight?"

"Mother is having friends over and she'll be very disappointed if I don't help her serve. I'll phone you tomorrow morning and tell you where I'll meet you."

"I'm still not good enough to call for you at your house," he growled.

But he was no longer very mad.

"Honey, we'll talk it over tomorrow. Mother is calling me now. Good-bye till tomorrow."

"So long, Beverly," he said with his voice a little mushy.

It wasn't really so hard to handle them.

When I returned to the living room, Ben's quiet brown eyes picked me up at the door and followed me to the couch. I put something special into my walk and sat down on the couch and crossed my knees and smoothed out my Basque shirt.

He was something like Frankie. He was not as young or big or handsome, but there was the same ruggedness and virility. And he was more intelligent, more experienced. He wouldn't apologize all over the place if he took a girl in his arms.

But just now he was attending strictly to his detective business.

"On Tuesday night, how long before you did your father return home?" he asked me abruptly.

At once I was on guard. Daddy had told Mr. Fleet and then the coroner at the inquest that he had returned home at ten-thirty. I didn't know why Ben was trying to find out if it had been earlier, but he was. There was something deep and menacing behind that question.

"I got home before Daddy," I told him.

"And he was in by ten-thirty?"

"Just about."

"How can you be sure? I've heard you didn't wear a watch."

"I looked at the kitchen clock."

"What were you doing in the kitchen?"

He was too fast for me. I pulled my legs under me and snuggled into the corner of the couch to give myself time to catch my breath.

SOMETHING hard pressed into my thigh. It was the notebook in which I kept my diary. I thought I'd pushed it all the way under a couch pillow when Daddy entered with Ben, but now one corner was sticking into me. I shoved the notebook down as far as it

would go.

Ben sucked on his pipe and waited patiently for me to answer his question. I smiled sweetly.

"I went into the kitchen for a glass of milk. I always have a glass of milk before I go to bed. I remember looking at the kitchen clock and thinking that I'd returned home early. It was just ten-thirty. Less than a minute later I heard Daddy come in."

"You went straight into the kitchen when you arrived home?"

"Well, I stopped in the hall to take off my coat."

Something was wrong. But what? Why was he staring at me so gravely?

"What did you do between the time Frank Townsend dropped you off and you came into the house?" he asked me quietly.

Now I saw it. He had been awfully smart. All along I had thought he was checking up on Daddy when really he was checking up on me.

"Frankie didn't take me all the way home," I told him. "He dropped me off a few blocks away."

"And then he drove to the garage and put the car away and went upstairs and put the lights on and looked out of the window and saw your father. That was a quarter after ten, a few minutes more or less. At any rate, you should have been home some time before that even if you had walked twice the distance. But you admit that you didn't get home till twenty or more minutes after Frank let you off."

Little shivers ran over me. He was the most exciting man I had ever known. Dangerous men were always exciting. Like Frankie, only this man was much more dangerous.

I couldn't help making a breathless game of it.

"You're thinking that after I left Frankie there was time enough for me

to go to Rudy's house and kill Rudy."

"Uh-huh."

"But was there time for him to boil water and serve tea? After all, the most I could possibly have been there was ten minutes."

"Matterson might have had tea prepared for himself when you arrived, and he invited you to join him."

I STOOD up and shook my hair and threw back my shoulders. I let him take a very good look at me. His eyes had become blank. He didn't seem to be seeing me as a woman. I'd let it go too far.

I walked over to his chair.

"The truth is, Ben, that after I left Frankie and walked home I sat on the porch for a while."

"Doing what?"

"Dreaming."

"About how many men can be made to dance on the point of a needle?"

I reached down and let my fingers trail lightly over his cheek.

"You've a nasty mind, Ben."

Not a muscle of him moved. I took my hand away and went to the table and stood there with my back to him.

"What does a girl dream about?" I said softly. "Maybe about a very attractive detective coming into her life."

The chair springs creaked as he rose. I would have lost my faith in the male sex if he hadn't come to me. I felt him stand close behind me, but he didn't put his hands on me.

Keeping my back to him, I looked at him over my shoulder. He had taken his hat from the endtable and was running his fingers around the brim. He had strong white teeth which showed in a full, warm smile.

"Your technique is pretty good," he said. "Just about the right amount of subtlety, but not too subtle."

He was mocking me. I didn't care.

I twisted my torso and my shoulder touched his chest and my hair brushed his face. I leaned against him.

He stepped back.

"Thanks for giving me your time, Beverly. Good-bye."

He was smiling and rolling his hatbrim between his fingers as he strode to the door. Suddenly I hated his smile. He thought he was so superior that he could make a girl feel cheap.

I hesitated for a moment and then went after him. In the hall he was turning the doorknob.

"Good-bye, Ben."

I held out my hand to him. He took it. I looked into his face with my mouth half-open and my eyes melting.

He dropped my hand and opened the door.

"Ben, you'll come again, won't you? Soon."

"Uh-huh."

On the porch he put on his hat and then went down the steps. I didn't know if I hated him or not, but I did know that he was awfully exciting.

CHAPTER XI

David Reese

Saturday, May 17

8:08 P.M.

SPRING and Saturday evening, and the youth of Rexton was making love or looking for love. I drove slowly, taking in the strolling couples, the boys and girls sitting together on porch steps, the cars flashing by filled with laughter. On an evening like this all young women looked desirable.

Not that the best of them could hold a candle to Beverly. The lass I had a date with was all the great beauties of history rolled into one, and I was her errant swain.

It was swell going to her, anticipating being with her. She'd made two promises. No more Frank Townsend or any other man. Marriage within a year, maybe a lot sooner. Marriage would solve everything. Even if anything came of what had hapened to Matterson Tuesday night, even if any of it touched us later, we'd face it as man and wife. We'd lick it by being together.

So what was there to torment myself with now? There wasn't anything bigger than love. To hell with anything but love!

Bev Atwood was the most beautiful woman in Rexton or the state or the world, and she loved me. I felt fine going to keep my date with her, didn't I? All right. I felt fine. Period.

I pulled my car up at the curb in front of the Atwood house. Tossed my hat on the back seat, ran a hand through my hair, straightened my tie, looked at my watch. Twenty minutes early for my date. So what? If she wasn't ready, I'd wait for her. I'd already spent a lifetime waiting for her.

Mrs. Atwood answered the door.

"Good-evening, David," she greeted me, giving me a gentle smile that made me feel like an honored guest.

Very convenient having a girl's folks cheer for you. A nice family to get into, this sweet little woman who'd make a pleasant mother-in-law, and Mr. Atwood who was a pretty decent guy when you got to know him. I was one lad who wouldn't have in-law trouble.

"Bev in?"

"I saw her in the garden a few minutes ago. Come in, David. I'll call her."

I said: "Don't bother. I'll fetch her myself."

I sauntered around to the back of the house. Bev wasn't in sight, but the

rather narrow garden stretched for a couple of hundred feet, and toward the back, against Matterson's hedge, there was a grape arbor with a wooden bench in it. Maybe she was waiting for me in the arbor. A place for lovers. A place to gather her in my arms, to hold her close, to dip my mouth to her fresh, eager, unpainted lips.

I walked up the path between the flower beds which had just been planted. Walked between four peach trees centering the garden. And heard voices in the arbor.

She was there, but she wasn't alone.

I STOPPED. Night was falling and there was the stillness of twilight. Even so I couldn't hear what they were saying. They were keeping their voices low.

I moved closer. Then I could distinguish their words. Again I stopped. Listening to them was like dying.

"Frankie, you're impossible!" Bev said. "Our date was for tomorrow."

She'd promised me she'd never again make a date with him.

Frank Townsend growled: "Yeah, because your mother is throwing a party tonight. I came around to see if you were still giving me a run-around. Where's the party?"

"Silly, it's too early. They won't be here till nine."

"All right, so you can be with me till then."

"Frankie, honey, you make it so hard for me. You know how Mother feels about you. Suppose she were to see you here with me?"

Honey. She called me honey. She called him honey.

He said: "What am I, diseased or something? I see you in the garden and come over to you, and you drag me in here so I'll be hidden. I don't have to be treated like that. I'm as good as

anybody."

"Of course you are, honey."

Her tone was soft and wheedling, the way it was with me when I got sore and she was trying to pacify me.

He said: "If you liked me, you wouldn't give a hang what your mother said. You're no kid."

"I do care for you, honey. Lots."

The silence was back. I heard heavy breathing and thought it was the two in the arbor. Then I realized that I was listening to myself. I was moving again, approaching the arbor by the side. I was spying on them.

All right, I was spying. Who had a better right?

Frank said hoarsely: "God, Beverly, you're so beautiful!"

Then I saw them. I stood at the side of the arbor. The grape vine hadn't reached its lush summer growth, and I could see through it and through the lattice to which it clung.

It was darker in there than out in the garden. They were shadows so close together that they seemed like one. Her yellow hair and white face were scooped out of the gloom. Her head hung back, face tilted up to him bulking over her, white hands flat on his barrel chest. He was shaking like a tree in a hurricane.

"God, Beverly!" he said in a queer, tight voice.

The two shadows became completely one. His head bowed down to her up-lifted face. Her arms were around him, hands clawing at his back.

I stood watching them kiss. This was death. I listened to a voice that was not hers, and yet had to be hers, murmur thickly: "Honey, honey, what do you do to me?" And still their mouths remained together.

I was very calm. Knew exactly what I was doing when I turned the corner of the arbor to the entrance. His broad back bulked in front of me. All I

could see of her were her hands agitated below his shoulder-blades.

I said: "You don't have to worry about your date with me tonight, Bev."

FRANK swung around. He was still holding her and pulled her sideways with his motion, and there was the pale blend of yellow hair and white face against his dark jacket. She made a noise. A bleat, a sob, a choked outcry—one or all of them mingling into a single discordant sound. I kept hearing it after I had turned and was striding away from them down the path between the flower beds.

Then that sound of hers gathered volume and became words. "Dave, wait! Dave!"

With my head down, I kept walking. She was following me. Calling my name over and over as she ran. I turned off the path to the driveway, and now I could hear her running feet on the cinders.

She caught me when I had almost reached the street. She grabbed my upper arm with two hands and pulled me hard against her. I had to stop.

"Dave, let me explain!"

The soft pressure of her body was against my side. I turned my head to her. She didn't look so very beautiful. Maybe because of the fading light or whatever it was that contorted her face. Maybe because of an abrupt change in my perspective.

I said: "What's there to explain? If you enjoy Frank's kisses, don't let me stop you."

"Dave, honey, listen to me!"

A minute ago Frank had been honey. Now I was honey again.

I tore myself away from her. She clung and I had to be brutal. I didn't particularly want to hurt her, but I didn't particularly not want to hurt her. I got myself free of her, continued down

the driveway.

She followed me, taking small running steps at my side, touching me, saying my name. I didn't even glance at her. My car at the curb was my objective and nothing would keep me from it.

When I reached the sidewalk, Frank was with us. He had run after Beverly who was running after me. She was between us, and over her yellow hair Frank's eyes and mine met.

He wasn't going to hit me. His face showed that this time he wouldn't try to settle anything with his fists. There was something flabby and bewildered and stricken about him. Oddly, I felt myself sorry for him. A little.

Beverly didn't seem to know he was there, as close to her as I was. She reached for me.

"Dave, honey, if you'll only come into the house and let me talk to you . . ."

I stepped away from her hands touching me. Went to my car and tore open the door.

"Let me alone!" she cried. "I hate you! I hate all men!"

I looked back. She had said that to Frank. He had put his hands on her shoulders and now she was tearing away from him.

She screamed, "I hate everybody!" and ran to the house.

FOR the first time I was aware of the audience. The street seemed choked with Saturday evening strollers and people sitting outside their houses. Everybody, everything, had stopped. The street was holding its breath. Watching, listening. In an hour everybody in town would hear of it. There would be nudges and smirks wherever I went. And shame.

I got behind the wheel of my car. Fumbled for the starter with my foot.

Couldn't find it. Reached in my pocket for a cigarette. Found myself looking at the Atwood house.

Beverly had reached the porch. Her father stood in the house doorway. In that silence I could hear the mutter of his voice speaking to her. She didn't even look at him. Moved through that door as if he weren't there. And he stepped back into the house and both were out of sight.

The street stirred. Talked it up as if a curtain had just fallen on a play. I abandoned hunting for my cigarettes. Made an effort to find the starter with my toes and did and jammed in the gears.

Halfway up the block, I passed Frank Townsend walking with his head down and his stride quick and angry. My foot went on the brake, slowed the car. I didn't know why I'd done that. My foot hadn't obeyed any conscious command of my brain.

I brought my foot back on the gas and shoved the throttle all the way down to the floorboard.

CHAPTER XII

Ben Helm

Sunday, May 18

11:35 A.M.

THE sign under the mailbox said: "ANDREW WONDER AND SON, LICENSED ELECTRICIANS." A hundred feet in from the road a low green shingled house squatted at a foot of a small lawn unbroken by trees or shrubs. A nice looking young man and a nice looking young woman sat rocking gently on a porch glider.

The glider came to a halt when I ascended the porch.

"Ed Wonder?" I asked.

The young man stood up. "We'll be

out in a minute, Rose," he told the girl. Then he said to me: "Mind coming into the house, Mr. Helm?"

He led me through a living room and into a living room which was at the rear of the house. Obviously he didn't want the girl on the porch to hear what we said. He sat down at a round table covered with an embroidered cloth. A cut-glass vase crowded with lilacs stood in the precise center. I sat opposite him.

"Mind hurrying it?" he said. "My folks already left for church and I promised to meet them there with Rose."

I looked at my wristwatch. It was twenty after eleven. "You're late already."

"We wanted to talk something over. We—"

Ed Wonder broke off and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He reached across the table to offer me one. I shook my head and dug for my pipe and pouch.

"How do you know who I am?" I asked.

"Everybody knows you're in town and why. Yesterday somebody pointed you out to me on Division Street."

Nothing in his face or about his movements as he lit his cigarette showed that he was nervous, but he was. He had pink cheeks, a small mouth, warm blue eyes, lustrous blonde curly hair. A strong jaw and a hard masculine body saved him from being merely a pretty boy.

When he had his light, he went to a sideboard for an ashtray and returned with it to the table and placed it between us. He looked at me and away and back at me.

"Aren't you curious to know why I came here?" I said.

"Sure, but you'll tell me in your own sweet time. I can save you some questions by telling you I didn't know Mat-

tersen."

"Not at all?"

"I did a wiring job in his house a few months ago and he gave me a drink when he paid me. That was the only time I ever said a word to him."

"But you know Beverly Atwood," I said.

CONVULSIVELY his fingers mangled his cigarette. The fire touched his palm; torn and twisted paper, shreds of tobacco, and sparks fell on the tablecloth. He slapped his hand down, smothering the glowing ash with his flesh.

"You have it that bad?" I said.

Ed Wonder's small mouth clamped tight. Carefully he brushed the ruins of his cigarette into the ashtray.

"Are you trying to protect her good name or your own?" I asked.

A smile came into his soft eyes. "Look, mister. You ask any of the mothers in town. They'll tell you they wished their daughters were like Beverly Atwood. You never catch her necking in a corner at a party. She doesn't paint herself up or smoke or drink. She's never seen with men a decent girl shouldn't know. All that makes her a good girl, doesn't it?"

"No."

"You're a detective all right, mister." He laughed with subdued bitterness, then broke off and stared bleakly at me. "You're talking about Bev Atwood, but you're thinking of Frank Townsend. You came here to talk to me on account of that fight I got into with him last Monday at Teepee Inn."

"I heard it wasn't much of a fight."

"I spot Frank fifty pounds and he's a one-punch man. I'd like to get him in a ring where there are rules. I'm a hell of a lot faster. I'd cut him to pieces. Trouble was, Monday night I was a little high and left myself wide open to

his sock."

"Did you get fresh to Beverly because you were drunk?"

"You've been listening to Frank. All we did was dance. He claims I held her too tight. He'd say that about anybody who came within a foot of her. And Bev didn't mind. Plenty of times I'd held—" He wet his lips. "Anyway, Frank barged over. I spot him fifty pounds, but I wouldn't let anybody in pants get wise with me. So I told him where to get off and he socked me before I could get my hands up. That's all there was to it."

I let a minute pass without conversation.

The silence got under Ed Wonder's skin. "I'll tell you this, mister. You can't find out from me if Bev played around with Matterson. I wouldn't be surprised if she did, but I just don't know."

"You think she made Frank jealous of Matterson?"

Ed Wonder slouched back in his chair. Caution wiped his face blank. "You're being paid to do the thinking."

"You've just done some of it. You suggested that Frank murdered Matterson because of Beverly."

"You didn't hear me say that."

"Not directly. What can you add?"

"All I know is some of the talk around town. I hear the police have the finger on Frank and are trying to prove he did it. Well, you can't prove anything by me because I don't know anything."

"Never mind Frank. I'm interested in Beverly."

"What man isn't? You can put it the other way around too."

I let another silence lie between us. Then I said: "What makes you so bitter about her? Were there too many other men?"

"A guy can stand so much and then

he's through."

"No," I said. "A man becomes bitter because the girl throws him over. There'd been David Reese and Frank Townsend for a number of years. They were the standbys. But there were others, like you, the ones she tired of after a while and dropped."

HE SAID something under his breath. I didn't hear what it was. I didn't have to.

"Was Mike Parker another one?" I asked.

He laughed between his teeth. "Mike was on the prowl for any female who wouldn't yell bloody murder if he laid a hand on her. I told you Bev was a good girl. She wouldn't have anything to do with a wolf like Mike."

"Is that your cute way of saying that she did?"

"You're a detective, mister. Figure it out."

I shook my head. "I don't believe you. In a town this small two people can't go out together without everybody knowing. I've spoken to a lot of people since I came here and I've heard a lot, but I've never heard of Beverly and Mike together."

"I can show you a dozen places within a mile where two people can meet and nobody will know."

"I still don't get it," I said. "Beverly wasn't married or even engaged. She was seeing a number of different men. Why make a secret of Mike Parker?"

Ed Wonder plucked a cigarette out of his pack and thumped it on the back of his wrist. He seemed to be trying to smash the cigarette. "I'll tell you why. A girl can go out with Dave Reese and Frank and me and practically any other unmarried guy in town, and she'll still be a good girl. But good girls don't mess with wolves. So what

does a good girl do when she falls for a wolf? She doesn't let anybody know about it."

"But you knew."

"Yeah. The thing about wolves is they like to shoot their mouths off about the girls they make."

"And Frank must have known too."

"If I knew, why not Frank? He and Mike were working together on the Crown Hill road at the time. I always figured Bev was the real reason they had that fight. People said it was on account of Mike took Frank's sister Rachel to a dance. Maybe that was part of the reason. If I had a sister, I guess I wouldn't like her going with a wolf. But if you ask me, the big reason for the fight was Bev."

"A big enough reason to murder Mike?"

Ed Wonder found shreds of tobacco caught in the embroidery of the tablecloth. He plucked them out and deposited them in the ashtray. "Is that the way you figure it, mister?"

"Didn't it occur to you?"

"Well, you get all kinds of ideas when a man is killed. The police said it was an accident, and they should know." His head lifted sharply. "Look, Mr. Helm. It was all over between Bev and me when Mike was killed."

"Meaning you wouldn't have any interest in murdering Mike?" I said.

"That's right. I was going out steady with Rose Craston."

"The girl on the porch?"

"Yeah. We've known each other since we were in diapers. We're going to be married next month."

"Then why don't you get Beverly out of your blood?"

He watched me cautiously out of narrowed eyes and decided not to comment. I tapped out my pipe in the ashtray and said that I'd kept him and Rose from church long enough. He

walked me back to the porch. I left him there with the girl he was to marry.

THE day was warm, the sun was bright, and I was lonely. As I walked through the town, I washed my mind of my job and day-dreamed of Greta.

Sundays especially a man and his wife should be together. They should lounge on the porch reading the Sunday paper, or stroll in shady places, or visit relatives and friends, or, if they felt like it and had no children, lie in bed all day. How was Greta, two thousand miles away, filling the emptiness of a Sunday?

Somebody called my name. I glanced to my left to see a car pass and a pudgy hand wave through the driver's window. District Attorney Fleet was driving somewhere with his wife and two grown children. I waved back. A few minutes later, when I was passing through the closed-down business section of Rexton, I saw somebody else I knew. Across the street Frank Townsend stood against a telephone pole.

He wasn't looking in my direction, but when I started to cross the street he turned suddenly and walked rapidly away. At the moment there wasn't any reason to chase after him. I continued toward the house where I boarded.

It was a decaying frame house which looked older than anything else in town except the two women who owned it. They were sisters, one named Mrs. Ebling and the other named Miss Hoopes, and they were withered and genteel and poor. My room was airy and my bed soft and Mrs. Ebling cooked superbly, but I was the only boarder. I wished that I could drum up trade for them.

On the way to my room I passed them listening to hymns on the radio. Always before they had greeted me

with benign little smiles. Now their wrinkled faces were stern and their old eyes disapproving.

"A young woman telephoned you," Miss Hoopes told me tartly. "She refused to leave her name."

"Any message?" I asked.

"She said never mind when I asked her and hung up." She turned her head to her sister. "A young woman who refused to leave her name."

Mrs. Ebling glared at me. "People who do not leave their names are ashamed to tell who they are."

I had told them that I was married. I had received a phone call from a young woman who would not leave her name. Ergo, scandal.

"It must be a business call," I explained.

"It is my understanding that business people always leave their names," Miss Hoopes countered primly.

Mrs. Ebling nodded tight-lipped.

I was trying to think up a convincing rebuttal to save my character when the doorbell rang.

THE front door led directly into the living room, and Mrs. Ebling had only a few feet to go to open it. Rachel Townsend stood there.

"Did Mr. Helm return yet?" she asked. Then she saw me and sighed, "Mr. Helm," and backed out of the house as if in flight.

I moved to the door between two pairs of old eyes smug with scandalous wisdom. As soon as I was outside, I heard Mrs. Ebling breathe ecstatically: "It's that Townsend girl! Did you see, she wouldn't even come into the house to talk to him. Business, indeed!"

Well, old women have so little fun they are entitled to some.

Rachel Townsend was waiting for me by the crumbling picket fence. It struck me again how much she resem-

bled Greta. Not as beautiful, not as stately and mature, but she had Greta's vivid coloring and black eyes and fine, proud carriage.

She took a step forward to meet me. "Mr. Helm, did you arrest my brother?"

"No."

The information didn't make her feel better. Her hands were locked in front of her and her arms were close against her sides, as if she were holding herself together. "I haven't seen Frankie since yesterday afternoon. He didn't come home to sleep."

"He's a big boy," I said. "Can't he spend a night away from home without his sister's permission?"

"He phones me whenever he intends to stay away over night. He always does when he lives with me. He's very considerate that way." Her dark eyes appealed to me—for what, I couldn't quite understand. "Maybe I'm silly worrying over a grown man spending a night away from home. But at a time like this . . ." Her voice faltered and died.

"A time like this," I echoed softly. "A time of murder and hunting for a murderer. What's the reason you thought he was arrested?"

She turned her face away.

I stretched out a hand to pat her shoulder—a reassuring gesture, maybe because she looked like Geta. I withdrew the hand before it reached her; my landladies would be watching from a window.

"Frank's all right," I told her. "I saw him on Division Street less than half an hour ago."

RACHEL'S hands unclasped. She brushed a stray black strand of hair from her brow. "I wonder where he could have been," she murmured.

"Maybe on a bender."

"No. Frankie doesn't drink that much. He hardly drank at all until—" Her face darkened. "He used to be so sweet and good-natured. When he was a boy, he was almost as big as he is now, but he never got into a fight. Whatever he's become, Beverly Atwood did to him. The other day in my house you asked him what he has against the world. He's taking out on the world what Beverly's doing to him. When he hits a man, he's really hitting out at Beverly, but he doesn't know it."

"Good psychology," I commented. "But right now Beverly's not all that's eating him. He thinks maybe you murdered Parker and Matterson."

"I? What earthly reason would I have?"

"A very earthly reason. Perhaps both men preferred Beverly to you."

Her eyelids flickered. She took a deep breath. I had long ago stopped trying to interpret facial expressions. Some people showed emotions more easily and some were better actors.

"So you know about Mike and Beverly?" she whispered.

"Uh-huh. And you knew and Frank knew."

"Oh, I admit I knew. Mike boasted to me of his many conquests the night I went to that dance with him. But Frankie didn't know. Nobody would have dared tell him, and he wouldn't have believed anybody who did."

"Mike Parker would've dared," I said. "I think something like this happened. The day after you went to the dance with Mike, Frank told him to stay away from you. Mike was a two-fisted road foreman, a pretty tough guy himself. He mocked Frank. Next, he said, Frank would want him to stay away from Beverly Atwood too in spite of the fact that she had other ideas on the subject. And Frank beat him

up."

Rachel looked me over disdainfully. "You're guessing. Even if it had happened that way, Frank would have been sure that Mike lied."

"Then why are you afraid your brother murdered Mike?"

She leaned lightly against the picket fence. The line of her torso from knee to shoulder was a charming arc. "You're quite a detective to be able to look into people's minds," she said sarcastically.

"I do my best. Take Frank, for instance. If he were trying to protect his own chin, he'd roar and bully and fight. Instead he runs away from me. He's afraid of me because he's afraid for you."

"So you want it both ways. I'm the murderer and Frankie is the murderer."

"I didn't say that. I said that you each suspect that the other is the murderer and you're trying to cover up for each other. You can relax as far as your brother is concerned. He didn't kill Mike Parker."

Rachel straightened up. Her eyes were wary, anticipating a trap.

"The fact remains that it was Frank who beat Mike up," I said. "Frank had found his satisfaction through his fists. It's the beaten man who goes for a weapon, who broods revenge."

"Yes," she whispered eagerly. "Frankie wouldn't kill a man."

"I agree. Murder is a crime of frustration. A person murders because he can't get what he wants in any other way. Frank has his fists. For the same reason he didn't kill Matterson. A bean pot is a coward's weapon, a sneak's weapon, a physically helpless person's weapon. Frank's none of these. It would never have occurred to him to use anything but his two hands."

SHE turned her head to watch a car go by, as if it had particular interest

for her, though likely she didn't actually look at it. "You don't have to convince me, Mr. Helm. I never doubted Frank's innocence."

"Because you knew all along who the murderer is?"

She turned back to me with a wry smile on her generous mouth. "What a way you have of making a living! Doing low mean things like showing my brother the sketches Rudy Matterson drew of me. Trying to trap people. Trying to frighten them. Doesn't it ever make you sick to your stomach?"

"Sometimes."

She tossed her head. "If I had to kill anybody, wouldn't I have selected Beverly?"

"A woman scorned takes it out on the man."

"And a woman like me, who couldn't beat up a man like Rudy Matterson, would snatch up a bean pot?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "And Mike Parker, meeting you in the woods, wouldn't hesitate to hand over his loaded shotgun to you."

I didn't like it, but that was the way I worked. If her contempt bothered me, it was my job to take it.

"I suppose it'll be a waste of time to tell you how wrong you are," she said with a curl to her red mouth.

"Time is what I have plenty of. I'll stand here all day listening to you."

"Because I remind you of your wife?" she sneered. "No, thank you. I have something better to do."

She moved away from me, walking straight and proud along the picket fence to the gate hanging on one hinge.

I started back to the house. A pair of curtains in a window came together. At any rate, my landladies had enjoyed it.

(Continued on page 122)

GUNS OF CRIME

FORENSIC ballistics is an amazing science which has proved of great value to those whose business it is to detect crime. Guns are necessities to men who perpetrate violence. Ballistics prove which gun fired what bullet, thus aiding in the identification of the guilty. It was only recently in the history of firearms that the discovery was made that every gun is different from any other gun, and that each bullet fired is imprinted by the gun barrel with markings peculiar to that gun alone. A manufactured article is usually identical with others of its kind; guns, however, are unique in that each one emerges from the manufacturing process with differences so definite and marked as to form the basis for a study of vast importance to criminology.

When a pistol or rifle is being made, a hole is

bored through a cylindrical piece of steel. Formerly this hole was left smooth. Then it was discovered that if spiral grooves were cut inside the gun barrel, the bullet would be given a spin as it left the gun and could attain much greater velocity. The instrument which is used to cut these grooves is pulled through the barrel, dragging the shavings which it cuts. It is these steel shavings, revolving inside the barrel, which scratch the surface in patterns which are constantly different. The cutter, too, loses its edge, thus increasing the variation inside the different gun barrels. Each tiny mark on the inside of a gun is transferred to the comparatively softer bullets fired from it, so that by studying both bullets and guns, the experts can positively identify the gun which fired a certain bullet.

—James Ruel.

NEWGATE PRISON

IMAGINATION is stirred by the thought of Newgate. The first prison with that name dates back to antiquity. None know for certain when it was built but it is thought to be soon after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Until a century or so ago it was not reserved for criminals alone. Men and women interned for political or religious reasons, mixed with the scum of the criminal class. In a thousand years what a vast army of scoundrels passed from freedom through the sullen gates, some in silken finery and

some in coarsest, filthy rags, never to come out alive from that cesspool of humanity.

Suffering, cruelty, dirt, disease and depravity are in the tale of Newgate. There was a certain freedom about it, some desperate jollity, even, compared with the sombre and solitary French Bastille. But in the promiscuity of Newgate, in the evil consequent of herding together so many people most of them the very dregs of humanity, was something of democracy.

The name of the famous Lord Mayor of Lon-

don, Dick Whittington, is associated with the prison. He left money for restoration purposes as he did in the case of other city buildings. This was in 1419, and the prison for a long time afterward was known as "Whit's Palace." That lasted for a couple centuries and in 1629 it was in a state of utter ruin. Someone must have rebuilt it for it was mentioned in a pamphlet of 1638 as being new-fronted and new-faced. It was gutted during the fire of 1666 and again rebuilt. Another ten years and the jail suffered from the Gordon rioters, and eight years later Lord George was imprisoned there in connection with the Diamond Necklace affair.

From six hundred to double that number was its population toward the end of the eighteenth century, and at least one hundred and sixty offenses were punishable by death. The conditions were still squalid and revolting. It was like a den of wild beasts filled with men and women fighting and dancing, swearing, gaming, yelling and justly

deserving the name of "hell above ground."

The governor ran the tap or canteen, the profits from which were his. Condemned felons, surrounded by their admiring doxies, rummaged their befuddled brains for appropriate speeches to be made on the scaffold. Madmen tore about or wailed disconsolately in corners. There were no sanitary arrangements and the stench was abominable. As many victims died of disease as were carted away daily to Tyburn. After executions at Tyburn were abolished, they took place outside the jail. Tyburn was a mile or more away, and the people would leave their slums and form in a procession, cheering the condemned and urging him to die game. The last execution, that of Michael Barrett, hanged for complicity in the blowing up of Clerkenwell prison, took place in 1868. Twelve years later Newgate ceased to be used as a prison at all and finally the old building was leveled to the ground.

—Sandy Miller.

THE CONDEMNED MAN'S LAST MEAL

SOMETIMES the food on a prisoner's last tray would give a person with a cast-iron stomach indigestion just to look at it. The meal might consist of chow mein, sour cream mixed with vegetables, chile con carne, roast turkey with a platter of spaghetti, strawberry shortcake, ice cream and coffee. You'd wonder how a condemned man could down such an odd combination of food and live to walk to the chair. The answer is that he eats practically nothing. He has simply followed the Death House custom and ordered the dishes that would appeal to other

inmates whose hour had not yet come. He knew they would get what he left.

For the Chinese there was the chow mein. The sour cream with vegetables was ordered for the Jewish prisoner. Spaghetti will delight the Italian. The rest go to the other inmates and as for the condemned, he might take a sip of coffee, but of course he doesn't even enjoy that. You can be sure that the following morning the newspapers will say that "the condemned man relished a hearty meal."

—June Lurie.

JIM, THE PENMAN

A GOOD many years ago there lived in England a gentleman by the name of James Townsend Seward. Born to high social position, and of a fine legal background, he might have lived a pleasant, useful and exemplary life. Instead, he chose to live on the fruits of the effort of others, and to use his natural ability and cleverness in the ways of crime. He is known to history as "Jim, the Penman," a master forger, whose methods have been widely imitated by like-minded men. Inevitably, however, they all slip up somewhere and are apprehended, even as was Jim, the Penman.

Seward himself never passed a bogus document. That risk was taken by the lesser members of his gang. Seward did the forging, and directed the activities of the band. One or two confederates would go to a town of some size and become established in lawful business of one kind or another. After a time they would choose a victim, usually a prominent merchant, trump up some charge against him, and start civil action. This would sooner or later result in signed letters from the victim to the confederates concerning the legal negotiations. Thus was obtained a signature to copy, plus a logical explanation for financial deal-

ings with the merchant involved.

At this point, Seward played his part. Using his considerable talent in penmanship, he would forge the merchant's signature to a check of a good-sized amount, and send it to his assistant. This man would ask the office boy, always a conscientious and unsuspecting local youth, to cash the check at the bank. At this important stage in the game, Seward's men were very watchful. Shadowing the lad on his trip to the bank, they would immediately flee if there arose any doubt that the payment would be made; and try again in some other city. Usually, however, their plans worked perfectly and the boy returned with the money, whereupon the conspirators seized the cash and made their getaway.

This system worked for several years, until Seward himself made the fatal mistake. Confused by the large number of aliases used by his men, he inscribed the wrong name on a perfectly legitimate check which he sent to one of his aides. This man, stupidly, tried to collect the draft. An investigation was started, which soon snowballed into an exposure of the whole set-up. Jim, the Penman, had come to the end of his career of crime.

—Pete Boggs.

The Black Temple

By H. B. Hickey

I HAD a date to pick up Ellen at the office where she worked and I got there at twelve o'clock sharp. It was my day off and except for the badge on the underside of my lapel and the gun in the shoulder holster I didn't have a thing to remind me I was a detective.

Ellen had arranged for a half holiday and we figured to make a real day of it.

It was one of those law firms that

are run like department stores and I guess you could say that Ellen was in charge of the odds and ends counter. Anything that didn't fit one of the other departments was dumped in her lap.

She wasn't ready to go yet, which was unusual because she is very punctual for a girl with her looks. I cooled my heels in one of the chairs outside her private office and after a long time

They sat mutely, listening to the smooth voice of the speaker on the marble dais.



**There are people who attend rites
of strange origin, which are held
on eerie grounds. Like this group
of people in the Black Temple . . .**



a man came out.

He tripped over one of my big feet and if I were he I would have got mad. He didn't.

I had grabbed him to keep him from falling and we were both standing, facing each other, while I kept saying, "I'm awfully sorry."

"Not at all," he said. "It is nothing." His voice had a strange accent, one that I'd never heard before, and it made me look more closely at him.

About my height, he was; six feet and a little over, but not as broad as I, and the very gray sleek hair and the fine lines around his mouth indicated that he was much older. His upper arm, though, where I had grabbed him, was as hard as an arm could be, and there was not the slightest sign of a bulge at his beltline.

The eyes were what got me. I've seen a lot of these older, distinguished looking men, who kept themselves in good shape, but I had never seen eyes like his in any man. They were black; not coal black, but so much blacker than coal that they were more like night, not tangible, but something you could look into and into and into without ever seeing anything.

I was still looking into those eyes when I woke up to find that it was Ellen standing before me and not the man. She stared at me.

"What's the matter, Dan?" she asked worriedly. "You look like you were in a trance."

"I guess I was," I told her. I was ashamed to tell her the cause of it though, so I stood there and looked at her and went into a different kind of a trance.

ELLEN was blond and tall almost to my forehead, and she was peaches and cream but not cuddly. Her shoes were feminine without being instru-

ments of torture and she stood solid in them. She was much, much woman and it took a six foot redhead like me walking beside her to keep her from getting whistled at by strange guys. We had met at the state U. when she took a class in criminology to round out her law studies.

"You had the queerest look," she told me as we walked out of the office, "as though you were reaching for something with your eyes and couldn't quite get it."

"That's the way it felt too," I said. "It was that guy who came out of your office."

"Mr. Fatoul," she nodded. "Ibn Fatoul. I happened to look into his eyes when he first came in and I almost got lost too. After that I kept my eyes on the desk while we talked."

I didn't ask any questions. I'm not one to pry into Ellen's business affairs, which are often confidential, and she seldom talked shop. This time was different. While we ate lunch she told me about Ibn Fatoul.

"The way I happened to get his case," she explained, "was that when he called he asked that the case be assigned to someone who could give it undivided attention. Since it's such an unusual case they turned it over to me."

I had to wait to hear what made his case so unusual because Ellen was on the steak course. She works hard and when she eats she damns the calories. When the coffee came I lit her cigarette for her and she settled back.

"Mr. Fatoul is being threatened with a law suit, and a very unusual one. People in his line are often involved in actions, especially with the district attorney's office."

At the mention of the D.A.'s office my ears perked up. "Just what line is this Mr. Fatoul of yours in?" I inquired.

"He is the founder and leader of a cult," said Ellen.

"Oh, oh!" I said. "And someone is suing him because he got their grandmother to will all her money to the cult instead of leaving it to them."

"Don't talk like a cop," she chided me. "I told you this was different. Apparently Mr. Fatoul has never been in trouble of that sort because I had him checked before he came in. From what I could judge I should say that Mr. Fatoul is a sincere and honest man."

"There comes a time in every woman's life when she falls for older men," I kidded her. She looked a little angry so I rushed on.

"Just what is it that this Oriental character is so sincere and honest about?" I wanted to know.

"It seems that Mr. Fatoul is the present repository of an ancient secret."

"Who isn't?" I wisecracked. "At least in that racket."

She was warmed up though, and paying no attention to me. It would have attracted notice if she were talking to herself, that was all.

"Mr. Fatoul was quite frank and open about it," Ellen went on. "He told me that some years ago he was interested in Oriental religions and in mysticism. While he was in the Orient he visited an incredibly old temple, and there the secret was disclosed to him. It involves a sacred object of some sort which he brought back with him, and which is now in his temple."

"So he's got a temple too! With incense stinking up the place, no doubt. So far his racket is not any different. Just what brand of hokum does he peddle there?"

effect of forcing her to justify that opinion and to reinforce it. The little gold flecks in her gray eyes looked like the sparks that come off an emery wheel.

"You may have the fancy title of 'criminal investigator' but your mind is certainly flatfooted," she snapped. "You can't believe that someone else is sincere even if he happens to believe in something you don't."

"I like to rib you because you're so beautiful when you get sore," I told her.

That soothed her ruffled feelings because she could see I meant it. She gave me a smile that made me want to get her angry all over again just so I could watch the change once more.

"All right," Ellen said, "then Mr. Fatoul is considered innocent until proved otherwise."

I agreed. "He might be honest or he might even be a religious fanatic. One way to tell which of the three categories he fits into would be to find out if he has money, and if so, how he gets it."

"He's got enough money, I should say," Ellen said thoughtfully. "We stuck him a huge retainer and he paid it in nice fresh bills. But from what he told me the cult is small, not all its members are wealthy, and in either case it doesn't matter because the dues are very low and no gifts of any kind are accepted. He was recently willed a large sum of money and immediately turned it over to a reputable charity. I found out that much about him."

"Hmmm . . ." I hummed. "Sounds interesting. Did he happen to tell you what it is that this secret of his does for the true believers?"

Ellen hesitated. "He did. I know it sounds incredible but he had some proofs with him—and I know what constitutes a valid proof—that almost convinced me. But the thing is that

ELLEN was only human. She had expressed the opinion that Fatoul was no faker and my needling had the

he himself is the greatest proof of all!"

"Of all *what?*" I begged. But Ellen was getting even with me. She was going to get there the longest way around.

"I'm coming to that," she said sweetly. "Would you believe that Mr. Fatoul is one hundred years old?"

"No, I wouldn't believe it," I told her flatly.

"Well, he is!" From the way her chin stuck out I could see there was no use arguing that point.

"I still think Bernard McFadden could take him," I said. "So that's the secret. Stay young forever! The fountain of youth! Does he do it with diet, contemplation of the navel, or forty push-ups every morning before breakfast?"

She couldn't help laughing. "He said he's that old, anyway. Whether he is or not, we've taken the case and he's convinced me that he is not out to defraud anyone."

"Whew . . ." I said. "For a minute there you had me on the ropes. I thought you might really have fallen for that 'never say die' gag."

"I didn't say I don't believe him," she reminded me.

"All right, he's still innocent," I said. "But why should anyone want to sue him? Is he trying to set up a carrot juice monopoly?"

"For that last crack," she told me, "you are going to wait until tonight to find out why. I promised Mr. Fatoul that I would come to the temple tonight to see him. I also want to see something else that has a bearing on the case."

FOR the rest of the afternoon we forgot about Mr. Fatoul and his cult and concentrated on enjoying ourselves. We went to the Art Institute to see some new paintings and after that we

took in a show. Before I knew it we were finished with dinner. Somehow, a day with Ellen never seemed to last long enough. Each minute of the time was packed with a day's happiness but added together the pile was no bigger than a second.

Ellen told me where the temple was and I headed the car in that direction. It was a district that I didn't know very well, a run down immigrant district. My job kept me in the bureau's laboratory most of the time anyway.

The temple was on Harper Avenue, between 57th and 58th streets. We drove south on Warren Boulevard until we hit 35th Street and went down that until we got to Harper. From there it was straight south, across carlines on 40th and 50th Streets. It was still pretty light outdoors and there were mobs of kids on the street.

As we crossed the street car tracks on 50th Ellen told me to slow down. We were just creeping along now and she was busy looking out of the window, for what, I couldn't tell. The only thing different about the neighborhood here was that I couldn't see any kids around.

It did look like a pretty religious neighborhood though. After a couple of blocks I realized that every house had a cross on the door and most of the crosses were extraordinarily large. I had never seen anything like it before.

Closer to the temple some of the houses were obviously vacant, and the buildings that flanked it were not only unoccupied but also boarded up.

The temple itself was not an imposing structure; it was almost square, windowless, and built of some sort of black stone blocks. Ellen and I got out of the car and I held the heavy black metal door of the temple open for her.

We were in a small room and before us was another black door that I could

not open. This door had some sort of lettering on it which I could not decipher. It looked like the writing on old Egyptian papyrus.

We had to wait until the door was opened from the inside and Ibn Fatoul himself opened it for us. He looked surprised to see me but the surprise was only momentary. Ellen explained my presence.

"We do not welcome guests," he said frankly. "However, it may be a good thing that a member of the police department will be present at the rites."

I looked at him with respect. Fake or fanatic, he had an observing eye. No one had said anything about my being on the force and I knew that there was no bulge under my coat.

Fatoul led us up some black stairs to a balcony which overlooked the floor of the temple, and from the balcony into an apartment. The apartment was simply but expensively furnished, no chairs but several large divans.

ELLEN and I sat together on one of the divans and Fatoul disappeared into another room and came back with a tray of cocktails. I must have looked surprised because he smiled down at me and for a second I looked into those eyes again. He handed us each a drink and took one for himself before sitting down across from us.

"You are surprised that I offer you cocktails?" he asked me in that strange accent of his. There was no answer to that one so I let him go on.

"I do not think I gave Miss Anders a very detailed picture of our beliefs and our goals. I am sure that you are both intelligent enough to understand even if you cannot believe with us." He favored Ellen with a look that made my collar get tight and she smiled at him.

"Before you start," I interrupted,

"maybe you could tell us how long you've been here."

"I built this temple some fifteen years ago," he said. "Of course I was a much older man then."

I didn't bat an eye. Before long I was going to hear stranger things than that, I was sure.

"For many years," he continued, "I had felt the call of the unknown, the occult. The riddles of life, I had found, were not to be answered by our usual methods. It was on a visit to Burma that I became the disciple of a Buddhist priest and when I returned to America I founded this temple.

"For some thirteen years I taught the values of the contemplative life to others who were searching as I was. I like to think I did some good."

Ibn Fatoul's voice seemed to fill the room, although he spoke softly. It was impossible to doubt his sincerity and his eyes were not the eyes of the fanatic.

He went on, "Still, I felt a lack; I had part of the truth, but the most vital part was missing. There was only one thing to do and I did that. I returned to Burma."

He looked at us. "Have you ever been in Burma?" he asked. We shook our heads.

"Then you can't imagine . . ." He spread his hands, temporarily at a loss for words, then went on. "A land incredibly ancient, cities greater than the one we live in buried beneath jungles in which the youngest trees are a thousand years old. A land where cultures infinitely advanced over ours flourished and died ages before the pyramids were built, while the Sahara still bloomed.

"In Burma there are men who do things which even the fakirs of India cannot duplicate. There, in Burma, I would find what I sought. And I did find it . . . Do not ask me how."

Suddenly he stopped and smiled. "I become so engrossed in my talking that I forget I may be boring you."

"Oh, no!" Ellen cried. "I was entranced! For a moment, while you spoke, I could see the land you talked of; feel its spell."

Fatoul was delighted. "I know you *do* feel it! The cradle of humanity was somewhere in Central Asia and the knowledge that we gained there has never left us. But with the ancients that knowledge was the search for Life and our world knows only Death. We deny the knowledge that is in us but it bubbles out in our philosophy, our dreams.

"And what does this knowledge concern? Nothing less than the *vis vitae*, the Vital Force! That life is more than just a fortuitous combination of atoms and molecules we all admit; innately we feel that Life itself surrounds us with its invisible presence, that while we are young it is absorbed into us, and when we grow older the magnetism that holds it weakens and we gradually die.

"In the Orient there are those who know that the secret exists, but they have lost the will to search for it. Here, we gave up the search long ago and turned to what we call Science. Science is admirable in its way, but is the long way and it avoids the issue."

I HAD to shake my head a few times to break the spell his words had woven around me. When I looked at Ellen there was a catch in my throat and I felt a vague, unearthly fear. Behind Fatoul's words were things I had to admit I was afraid of, and more afraid for Ellen than myself. Her eyes were staring deep into Ibn Fatoul's and her breast rose and fell with a sleeper's regularity. I didn't like the way he was looking at her. There was

more than a professional interest there.

I spoke loudly and was glad when Ellen's eyes turned toward me. "And you say you brought this secret back with you? The secret of the Life Force and how to retain it?"

Fatoul smiled softly. "What else? You were surprised before when I offered you liquor; you expected perhaps the asceticism of the ordinary mystic. The ancients were too wise for that. Of what avail Life is not for the pleasures which Life makes possible? Why hold on to that which has become a burden?"

He rose to his feet suddenly as a faraway gong sounded. "Come, it is time. I shall show you what I have done for some who were ready to release their grip and some who never had a good one." He smiled. "It is simple. Here there are no false mysteries."

Ellen and I followed him out onto the little balcony. Down below us a group of about twenty or twenty-five people stood talking in murmurs. Several of them looked quite old but most were not, and I noticed that a few were young. At least half were women, some of them good looking.

Fatoul was deep in thought for a few moments. He seemed to be making up his mind about something. "I think I can trust you," he said at last.

"Of course you can," Ellen assured him.

He explained himself. "As I said when you came in, we do not welcome visitors here. In fact, you are the first ever to be admitted to this temple, and only because Miss Anders refused to take my case unless she could see for herself that my activities were well within the law. My followers are pledged to complete secrecy and I know they keep their pledge."

"You have our word that we shall

say nothing of what we see and hear to anyone," Ellen said. She looked at me and I nodded that I, too, would keep the secret.

For a few seconds we had taken our eyes from the scene below and now when we looked down again we saw that the people were seated. A large number of cushions were scattered around the black floor and on these the cultists sat. Everyone faced a small dais on which there was another cushion, and slightly before that a shining black stone, about five feet square. The soft light that filled the temple came from a hidden source.

"One final bit of information and instruction before we join the others," Ibn Fatoul said. His voice was low and intense.

"Our most advanced Occidental science tells us that the Universe is composed of an Ether and that all solid things are merely concentrations of that Ether. Furthermore, it tells us that everything is in flux, in constant flow. So with the Life Force.

"The black stone which you see has the power, when activated properly, of concentrating and directing through itself that Life Force." He paused. "That is the secret; now for your instructions.

"You will drive all worldly thoughts from your minds and think only of the Life Force which flows about you and the gleaming stone. You will find cushions for yourselves and sit as the others do, facing the stone. You will repeat with them the ancient chant."

WE FOLLOWED Fatoul down the stairs and seated ourselves near the center of the group while he stepped onto the dais and sat directly behind the gleaming stone.

I wondered what the ancient chant was. Fatoul had forgotten to tell us.

Either that, or the chant was simple enough for us to pick up as soon as we heard it. I gave Fatoul a square shake and tried to follow his instructions about concentrating on the stone.

That was not hard, for as the light dimmed, the stone grew brighter. A faint incense was in the air, sweet but not cloying. The light grew fainter, the stone glowed. Beside me Ellen breathed slowly and deeply. From a far distance the gong sounded again.

Ibn Fatoul's voice was low and clear, compelling. "*Om mani padme hum.*" The ancient Buddhist chant. I knew its meaning: "O, the Jewel in the Lotus, Amen."

"*Om mani padme hum,*" the deep soothing voice chanted. Around us the others took up the chant, slowly, monotonously. Ellen and I chanted too.

Om mani padme hum . . . The lights were dim and the stone glowed, my eyes fixed on it. *Om mani padme hum . . .* The incense was filling the air with its fragrance . . . the fragrance of the Lotus. *Om mani padme hum . . .*

The Lotus drew me close . . . *Om mani . . .* the Black Lotus . . . *Padme hum . . .* the fragrance whirled through me, filling my being. The chant and the fragrance . . . the glow of the Lotus coming toward me and me toward it, mingling . . . the glow suffusing my being. *Om mani—padme—hum—*

There was a musk, an animal odor, mixed with the fragrance of the Lotus. It grew stronger, the Lotus lulling me . . . the other exciting me . . . exalted . . . inflamed . . .

Thoughts crawled out from beneath stones of repression . . . slimy things slithered from the dark recesses of my mind . . . I welcomed them, embraced them . . . the dark ecstasy of the Black Lotus . . . *Om mani padme hum . . .*

I swam slowly through Eternity toward the shores of the Present. Eter-

nity was dark and the Present was light but the invisible membrane that separated them moved before me. I struggled toward the light . . . struggled . . . struggled . . . and swam into it.

The light in the temple was strong and I rubbed my eyes. Around me others were doing the same. Beside me Ellen sat. I looked at her and her face was pale but color slowly surged into it as I watched. I knew that the same thing was happening to me.

My sensations were mixed. They opposed each other, yet there seemed no contradiction. I felt as though I had been drained dry and it was a clean feeling. Into the vacuum flowed a growing awareness, an increased sensibility, a feeling of new fresh power. The incense and the musk were gone and the air of the temple was invigorating, pure oxygen. I felt great. I felt . . . *younger*.

EVERYTHING outside me was clearer, sharper, but otherwise the same. We all sat where we had sat, the cushions the same, the stone on the dais still there, and behind it Ibn Fatoul slowly awakening.

My doubts were swaying. I had been a part of the miracle of regeneration, not merely an object of it; like a battery that had assisted in its own recharging.

Yet I was afraid. It was a slow haunting fear that took possession of me. I wondered why.

Ellen! "Ellen!" I gasped.

She did not look toward me. Her eyes were fixed on the figure of Ibn Fatoul.

Vague remembrances came to me of the incense and the musk and the things I had dreamed. Or had I dreamed them? I could feel myself blushing and I was afraid to look at Ellen.

It would have made no difference if

I had looked at her. She was oblivious to everything except Fatoul as he came toward us. Behind him as he came the others rose to their feet.

"Well?" he asked, looking down at us.

His voice broke the spell. We got to our feet slowly.

"You see?" he said, "there was really no mystery at all. Of course the power of the stone cannot be explained. We must accept that. But for the rest . . ."

"Oh, it was wonderful!" Ellen told him. "It *is* wonderful! I admit I was skeptical, but not now."

Fatoul could have looked triumphant. Instead he was gravely pleased.

"I am very happy," he said in his strange accent. "I admit I had misgivings. You are novices and you increased the size of the group. I felt, however, that I had to try to convince you. Without that, Miss Ander's efforts in my behalf would have been too weak perhaps. Failure would be disastrous."

Ellen gave him a look of utter devotion. "I won't fail you! I can't let myself fail you!"

His look of sincere thankfulness melted her and I could tell she moved as in a dream. The other people walked along with us to the door of the temple and there Fatoul bade us good-night. There was no talking.

Outside, the group quickly dispersed. Some of them had cars, others walked north toward the streetcar line. At the curb, just ahead of my car, a liveried chauffeur held the door of a limousine open for an older, well dressed man and a lovely dark girl I had noticed before. I noticed that there were only three numerals on the license plate of the limousine.

I helped Ellen into the car and we drove back north. Until we got to Warren Boulevard there was no conversation. Suddenly she broke loose.

"Dan," she said, "I feel wonderful! I feel so alive, so vibrant! I know it's late and I ought to go home and go to sleep so I'll be bright eyes tomorrow morning. I will go home but I know I won't be able to sleep. I've never felt so wide awake in my life!"

"Maybe Fatoul slipped us some kind of a needle while we were asleep," I suggested.

She looked hurt. "Please, Dan, don't try to be funny about this."

"I know," said I. "I feel the way you do. I've heard about similar things and I've always laughed at them. This thing I've lived through. I can't make myself believe completely in Fatoul, but if he's a fake . . ."

"How can you even hint such a thing!" Ellen snapped. I looked at her. When we had discussed Fatoul over our lunch she had defended him just to be on the other side. Now she was in earnest. I remembered the look she had given him.

"Remember what I said about falling for older men," I told her.

"Could you blame me if I did fall?" she asked. "If that man is not a saint I never saw one."

I WANTED to argue with her; I wanted to prove that the whole experience had a natural and rational explanation. But Ellen was no fool. She had been skeptical as I. That crack about a needle was meaningless. If there had been such a thing I would still have been able to feel it.

Hypnotism? That was possible, but I remembered my dreams; it isn't possible for hypnotism to make you think things that are abhorrent to you. Besides, it would have taken a greater hypnotist than any I had ever heard of to put us all in a trance and have us react exactly the same way.

And the way Ellen and I felt now.

That was too real to deny.

Ellen interrupted my thoughts. "I know what you're thinking, Dan," she said. "Here we are, I a lawyer and you a college trained police investigator, and we are forced to believe something that is utterly incredible."

"How do we know it's incredible?" I asked sourly. "I took a lot of science at school and I know that what Fatoul said about matter is true. So far we don't know what Life is. Maybe he was right about it being an actual force that flows about us."

I was saying things I didn't want to say. I forced myself to be truculent. "But I still think Fatoul is a fake! He's a crook!"

Ellen flared up. "Don't be a fool, Dan! A crook with his powers wouldn't be content with what he has. You could see for yourself that most of the people there tonight were of ordinary means. And how about the money he turned over to charity?"

"What charity did he give it to?" I demanded.

"The Red Cross," she told me. That was another hope gone.

I knew I was wrong to argue with her, that my arguments could not even convince *me*, but I couldn't help myself; I was losing her and I knew it.

"Bah, you're like all women," I snarled. "He comes along with his sleek gray hair and Oriental suavity and his mystic rejuvenation and you fall for it, hook, line and sinker."

There were spots of red in her cheeks but she kept her voice down. "You must be pretty effeminate yourself, because you know you believe it too!"

I started to say something and she cut me off. "You're like everyone else. Because something is beyond your ability to comprehend, you want to destroy it. You're as ignorant as the poor immigrant people in that neighborhood!"

I forced myself to calm down. "Let's not argue, honey," I said. She nodded and for a few minutes we drove in silence.

"By the way," I reminded her, "you promised to tell me what it was Fatoul is being sued for."

Ellen looked as though she were going to renege on her promise. I guess because we had drifted so far apart in such a short time she felt a little guilty and decided to tell me.

"It isn't exactly a suit," she explained. "The people in the neighborhood of the temple are going to bring court action to force Mr. Fatoul to move away. They want to drive him out."

I was surprised to see that I was instinctively on the defensive. "Why would they want to do that? From what we saw tonight he is certainly not disturbing the peace. His followers came and went quietly enough."

"Of course! It's just that they're superstitious and they don't know what goes on inside the temple so they imagine all sorts of awful things."

I shrugged. "So that's what the crosses on the doors meant! But on what grounds, exactly, do they base their action?"

"Such ridiculous ones that they won't have a chance in court. They claim that Mr. Fatoul rejuvenates his followers by stealing the energy from their children and that the children have become weak and spiritless and are dying slowly!"

ELLEN tried to sound flippant but it didn't come off. I felt something icy climb up and down my vertebrae. It wouldn't go away. Everything added up and I felt as though a door had opened and I had walked into something dank and dark and horrible and I couldn't get out.

Somehow the car had stopped itself in front of the apartment house where Ellen lived. She started to get out and I knew that tonight I wasn't going in with her. I grabbed her arm.

"Wait!" I begged. "Tell Fatoul you can't handle his case. Tell him to get someone else. Let him make someone else stay young forever."

She didn't say anything. She didn't have to because her answer was in her eyes. I watched the door close behind her and then drove home, my heart like lead.

It was late when I got home. I should have been sleepy but I wasn't. It might have been thoughts of Ellen that kept me awake but my sleeplessness wasn't of that kind. I was not sleepy because I was wide awake! The strange invigoration I had felt on awakening in the temple was still with me.

This was no fake. I didn't want to believe it and I couldn't make myself disbelieve it. For a while I lay on my back and let my thoughts go back through the events of the evening.

It was no good. Thinking only brought back the temple and the black stone and the eyes of Ibn Fatoul. After a while I could smell the incense and the musk. Inside I was alert, wakeful, my heart beating strongly. It was no good. I was believing and if I believed I couldn't fight against Fatoul.

There wasn't any sense of stewing in bed any longer. I got up and put my clothes on and went back downstairs and got into the car. I had to do something, only not be still. I drove.

I drove and made myself say over and over, "Fatoul is a fake." I don't know how many times I said it but all of a sudden I was believing it.

I felt better. Now I was Dan Rior-dan again, six feet tall and red headed and with a college education. There

was no such thing as a Life Force. I looked at a street sign and I was at Harper and 58th Street.

THE temple was less than a block away and I drove down Harper. Wherever a street light showed a doorway I could see a cross. On a sudden hunch I slammed on the brakes and got out of the car and walked up the stairs and rang the bell beside the cross.

While I waited for someone to answer the bell I told myself I was doing my duty. Ellen would be mad as hell but I couldn't help it. Besides, I had nothing to lose.

The man who answered the doorbell had been sleeping in his long underwear and he'd pulled on a pair of dirty work pants. His underwear was dirty too, and he needed a shave. He was getting gray and he was short and much too skinny.

He was scared too. While he looked up at me his tongue ran across his lips. At last he croaked, "What do you want? What you want, huh?" His accent made me think he was Italian.

I couldn't blame him for being frightened. It was past one o'clock in the morning and no time for a stranger to be ringing his bell unless he brought bad news.

I showed him my badge. "City detective," I told him. "Let me in."

He retreated before me into the living room where he had turned on a light before coming to the door. The room was big, with dark wood paneling and a broken down dirty couch and armchair. Next to the armchair on the floor was an Italian newspaper. The flat was big. This had been a high class neighborhood fifteen years before but it had slid downhill fast.

"What . . . what you want, huh?" he asked me again. His face was sweating.

"Don't worry," I told him, "we're not after you. We just heard you were having trouble with the fellow who runs that temple down the block and we thought we'd look into it."

Just then a thin dark woman with deep circles under her eyes came into the room. She wore a faded but clean wrapper and she was more frightened at sight of me than her husband had been. She let loose a string of Italian in a worried tone. Her husband answered her in the same language and I thought she was going to fall on her knees before me.

"Please, please! Mister policeman, help us!" she begged.

"That's just what I'm here for," I assured her. "You tell me what the trouble is and I'll try to help you."

In their broken English, interrupting each other often, they told me. Five years ago they had finally put together enough money to buy this house. For a few years everything had been fine. And now . . .

She was talking. "And now, mister policeman, you know what happens? That man, he'sa make black magic in his temple. You know what he'sa do there? He'sa make old people to be young again! He'sa steal the yout' from our kids and put it in those old people!

"We goin' to court. Maybe . . . maybe we makea him move. Ifa not, we got to move. We lose our money. But if we don' sell the house an' move away, our kids they die. Mama Maria!"

She broke down and cried. While she cried she tried to keep talking but I couldn't get anything except, "Bambinos, my bambinos."

I patted her shoulder. "Don't worry," I told her, "we're going to protect your bambinos. The first thing I want to do is get a look at them. I want to see what he did to them."

She wiped the sleeve of her wrapper across her eyes to dry them and she and her husband led me toward a back bedroom. I wasn't too worried, knowing how emotional these people were. Probably nothing wrong with the kids at all. I wished I could believe that.

THE bedroom was big and there was a double bed and a cot in it. In the bed two boys slept and there was a little girl on the cot. All three of them awoke as soon as the light was turned on.

I didn't want to believe what my eyes saw. Judging from the size of the children when they climbed out of bed none of them was over twelve years old. But they looked older than their parents!

A pallor under their dark skins made them look yellow and they were shrivelled and scrawny, their dark eyes sunk in deep hollows. A shudder ran through me. I got out of the room fast.

"Look here," I said when we were back in the living room, "do the kids hang around the temple?"

"Oh, no!" the woman gasped. "We not let! They stay in a house all a time now. We not let go to school, even."

"How about the other kids around here?" I wanted to know.

The husband spoke up. "Alla same. Stay in a house."

I couldn't understand it. "Didn't their teachers report it? Didn't someone come around to investigate?"

"Sure! Sure! Even send a doctor." He put the accent on the last syllable of "doctor". "Doctor he say kidsa under . . . under . . ."

"Undernourished," I supplied.

"That'sa right. No eat enough."

The mother broke in. "I giv da best to eat! But they *canna* eat! I tella doctor. He examine kids and say notting'sa wrong. Laugh at me; say

I'ma supertish. Give vitamin."

That would be the doctor, all right. He might even write a paper for the medical journals and call it something like, "The Results of Malnutrition on a Selected Group of Slum Children".

There was no use thinking about that. "How about your neighbor's kids?" I asked.

The husband shrugged hopelessly. "Sama thing."

But I had to be sure. "You know your neighbors?" He nodded. "How about coming with me to see them? Right now." He nodded again and went to put on a shirt.

We went next door. Here the people were Lithuanians. But the kids were the same.

It was after three o'clock as I drove back north. I wished I was as sleepy as I should have been at that hour. I had doubted and hoped, but after all, there was a limit to my capacity to doubt! There was no question that the kids were becoming aged. *And I felt younger!*

Then I thought of Ellen and I knew I couldn't let myself stop doubting. No matter how convinced I was I had to act as though the whole thing were a trick. But even a magician has a motive for his tricks. Where was Fatoul's motive?

There wasn't much stirring at that hour of night at headquarters. The desk sergeant was immersed in the sport pages of his paper and a couple of plainclothesmen sat with their feet on a desk, discussing the merits of various whiskies.

They looked at me, surprised, but didn't say anything. I walked up to the second floor and found a pinochle game going in a back room. Doc Finer was one of the players. He was a competent man even though he didn't shave often enough. I had worked the night

shift when I first came to the force and I knew him well.

"Doc," I said, "I want you to do something for me."

The game stopped for a second and a big beefy detective by the name of Myers said, "It's kinda late for a college boy to be up, ain't it?"

I paid no attention to him. "When this hand is finished I'd like to talk to you, doc," I said. He nodded. "Sure, Dan."

OUT in the hall, Finer looked at me. "What's up, Dan?" he asked.

"I really don't know. But whatever it is, it's something horrible." I told him about the kids, how they looked, what their parents had said, everything I could think of including the school doctor's opinion.

Finer rubbed the black stubble of his chin and his watery eyes got thoughtful. "So what do you want to know?"

"If there is anything you know of that could produce such an effect."

"You mean some drug that could make kids get old? None that I ever heard of, and believe me I've heard of some pretty queer ones."

"What then?"

He shrugged. "How do I know. Severe vitamin deficiencies, maybe. Could be the school doctor was right after all."

"It couldn't be. I'm sure of that."

Finer looked angry. "Listen, Dan, I'm five bucks out in that pinochle game! I'd be glad to help you out but you've got to cooperate, not just stand there and tell me that my idea is no good. What makes you so sure it isn't?"

I told him. "Because it's confined to a definite area. The kids a few blocks away are healthy. Besides, how could anyone take the vitamins out of the food?"

"So it's magic, then."

"I'm afraid it is," I said.

He studied me gravely. "Are you on the level or is this a gag?"

"On the level, doc."

"Come into my office and let's talk it over."

His office, right next to the lab, was full of equipment and jars filled with sickening specimens. His bag was open on the floor and the instruments inside were jumbled together.

We sat down and Finer looked me over. "Now," he said, "what have you been smoking?"

"I told you this was on the level," I snapped. "I've got to find out if it's possible to turn kids old or to make old people young."

"After you've been around as long as I have you'll believe anything is possible," Finer told me. "As far as making people younger, though, I think not. Everything from goat's milk to monkey glands has been tried with equal success—that is, none at all. There is a Russian by the name of Bogomolets who's supposed to have an anti-age serum, but it won't make an old man young again."

"Well, something made *me* a little younger," I said.

Finer looked worried. He was a lot smaller than I and if I was as nutty as I sounded his life might be in danger. I laughed at him.

"Don't worry, Doc. I'm not crazy, even if I sound like I am. I'm going to tell you the whole story from the beginning and then we'll see what you think."

When I finished telling him the story he shook his head and rubbed his chin some more.

"I don't believe it," he said. "Even if it's true, I don't believe it."

"That's the way I feel about it. But if it isn't, then what?"

"I don't know. About the way you and your girl felt, well, that could be explained away. But when you tie in the business about the kids,—frankly, I've got goose-flesh."

He sat and thought awhile. "A black stone that sucks up all the life force in the area and redirects it into the bodies of old people," he muttered.

Finer stood up. "Bunk!" he said. "Take off your clothes, Dan."

I took off my clothes and he went over me with a huge magnifying glass. He found an assortment of skin blemishes which included one he diagnosed as a fungus and prescribed for on the spot. I put my clothes back on.

"Nuts!" he said. "It doesn't make sense." He shook his head disgustedly. "You couldn't come around with your problems when I'm ahead of the game, could you? Well, now that you're here I intend to get to the bottom of this thing."

He brought over a wide mouthed bottle with a glass stopper. "Give me some spit," he ordered. I gave him as much saliva as I could and he put the stopper back on the bottle.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now you can go home. I'll get this stuff ready for some tests I want to run on it. In the morning when the help is down I'll finish it." I went home . . .

THE great white flag with the red cross on it waved leisurely in the morning breeze and I looked up at it until my neck ached. When I looked back down I saw that the glass door had a red cross on it too. My watch said nine o'clock on the nose so I went across the street and pushed open the glass door and went in. The elevator took me up to the third floor.

A clean-looking young girl with an

upsweep hair-do and slanting spectacles was dusting her desk as I came in the door marked Reception Room. She smiled up at me and said, "Good morning, sir. May I help you?"

I told her what I wanted and she said, "Well, sir, the only person who could give you such confidential information would be Mr. Fergus. If you will be seated I'll ask if he can see you."

It didn't take five minutes before she was back. "Mr. Fergus will see you now," she said. "It's right down this hall here." I went down the hall to Fergus' office and she went back to wiping her desk.

Mr. Fergus was a neat little man with a small paunch that just lifted the bottom of his vest. He wore rimless glasses and had an effeminate, but firm voice. After I had showed him my badge and explained what information I wanted he started to tap his desk with a pencil.

"This is most unusual," he said. "Yesterday we had a call from Mr. Fatoul's attorneys on the same matter."

"I know about that," I told him. "He seems to have donated a large sum of money to the Red Cross."

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. A considerable sum," Fergus said. "I can say that I wish we had more such contributions."

I got to the point. "What I would like to know is exactly how much money Mr. Fatoul contributed."

"Well," Mr. Fergus said, "well. Mr. Fatoul requested that there be no publicity, but if it is a police matter I suppose . . . Of course you could just take my word for it that the sum was quite large."

"I know how you feel," I told Fergus, "but I'm afraid that we will have to be told the exact amount. It is most important."

He nodded understandingly. "Very

well, then. The amount of his contribution was precisely three thousand dollars."

"That is a healthy contribution," I agreed.

"Munificent," Mr. Fergus said. "I trust there is no question of the validity of the gift."

"None at all," I assured him. I thanked him and left. It was almost nine-thirty when I came out of the building.

I was beginning to get tired. I'd stayed up and read and tried to think of all the possible angles and got nowhere. Now where was I? Still nowhere.

So now I was sure that Fatoul hadn't lied. He'd really turned over that money to the Red Cross. True, it wasn't the fortune I'd been led to believe but it was more than an ordinary crook would have parted with. So far, he wasn't any kind of a crook.

A big black limousine almost hit me as I went across the street with my head down. When I got to the other side I stood on the curb, looking at the fading back of the black car.

I thought back and tried to remember. Finally I did remember. I called Charley Miller at the license bureau. He answered the phone sounding as though he hadn't had time for breakfast.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"I want to play a game," I told him. "I'm going to give you a number and you'll give me a name."

"God save me from educated detectives who get up so early in the morning," he groaned. "Give me the number without any more horsing around."

"The number is F347," I said.

There were sounds at the other end of the line that said Charley hadn't hung up on me and after a while he picked up the phone again.

"The name is Blair Collinger. Address 1000 Lake Drive. Anything else?"

I said no and hung up. That address meant money, lots of it. Blair Collinger should have meant something, too. I couldn't think what. The phone book didn't help either.

TWO cups of coffee later I was still wracking my brain. Blair Collinger. There was no question I had heard or seen the name before. Where?

I wished I was one of those detectives whose brain was a filing system from which they could produce any needed fact on demand. Mine wasn't a brain like that. But I had an idea where I could get the information I wanted. The Sun was the closest newspaper so I went there.

Most of the clippings in the envelope were yellowed and dry with age. At the turn of the century Blair Collinger had been a name that made headlines. He had been an architect and a good one.

Collinger had been one of the leaders in developing a new American style of architecture. Many of the city's skyscrapers had been built by him. He had made a fortune and then retired at a comparatively early age. His chief interests were architecture, women—he had been married three times and divorced three times—and Oriental religions.

Three years before he had reluctantly come out of retirement to serve on the mayor's three-man city planning board. It was strictly non-political and the board's findings and recommendations were to be confidential. There were no clippings after that.

Blair Collinger was no crook either, that was a cinch. He was a respected and respectable old man and he had too much money to be fooling around with

anything crooked. I was just where I'd been before.

I walked to the bureau slowly. Maybe Doc Finer had discovered something. Inside me a voice said that there wasn't a chance. I believed it.

Finer wasn't around but I found a note from him. It said: "Tests won't be ready till noon. Going over to the library. See you later."

There wasn't much for me to do. Some small town police chief had sent in a couple of bullets for a comparison test but he'd wrapped them in plain brown paper so that they were all scratched up. It didn't matter; one was a thirty-two and the other came from a foreign gun of almost the same calibre. I wrote a note and wrapped it with the bullets to be sent back.

Then I got an idea. I called the district station out south and got the captain on the line. His name was Costello and he had a hoarse voice. I'd never met him so I told him who I was. He said, "Yeah?" as though it didn't mean a thing to him.

"Listen," I said, "you know that black temple on Harper?"

Now he was interested. "You're goddamned right I know that temple!" he bellowed. "What about it?"

"That's what I want to know. What about it?"

"I'll tell you what about it!" Costello roared. "That damn thing is driving me nuts! For years it's been there and I ain't had a peep about it. Now, all of a sudden, everybody's squawking. It makes their kids sick! They're in here every day. They want I should raid the place!"

"I tell them, 'sure, sure,' and finally they go away. But how can I raid the joint when they don't do nothin' there? And it's a cinch I couldn't get a warrant just because the neighbors are a bunch of superstitious foreigners. The

hell with 'em! Most of them don't vote anyway."

ON THAT high note he rang off.

Probably had to investigate a murder that was called in last month. But what the hell, dead men don't vote either.

In a way Costello had the right idea. He didn't believe in things like rejuvenation and turning children into shrivelled old men and women. But then, he hadn't been through the rites; he hadn't been let in on the secret.

On a sudden impulse I decided to go over and see Ellen. Maybe she wasn't angry any more and maybe in the light of day a red-headed detective would seem as romantic to her as a gray-haired man who was over a hundred. Maybe.

I left word at the desk for Finer as I went out. "I'll be back in a couple of hours," I told the sergeant.

But Ellen wasn't in. I stared at the receptionist. "You mean she's in court?"

"No, sir. I'm sure she isn't. When she's going to be in court she always leaves word. This time she left without saying anything. I don't know where she's gone."

But I knew where, and the knowledge sent shivers down my back. She had gone to the black temple, perhaps to learn more of the secrets of the Orient.

The way my mind played on the word "secrets" was beginning to make me nervous. It was as though from somewhere deep down it was trying to bring up a secret of its own. And then I had it.

I knew now why children had to grow old and why the old must become young! I knew and I was more afraid for Ellen than I had been before. I had to get to the temple before anything happened to her.

There are more than one hundred driving ordinances in our city code. I broke all but the one about parking next to a fire plug. Yesterday it had taken a half hour to drive the distance. I made it in exactly half that time.

The coupe hadn't rolled to a stop yet when I was inside the outer door of the black temple. I pounded on the inner door. From somewhere footsteps sounded and then a voice said, "Who knocks?"

I knew that voice. It belonged to a man with eyes like night. It belonged to a man who had strange powers, powers that I didn't understand. And inside the temple with him was Ellen.

"It's Dan Riordan," I said. I made my voice as matter of fact as possible. Who was I fooling?

Wonder of wonders, the door opened. Fatoul stood there in a black silk gown. I grabbed a handful of lapel and pulled him toward me. "Where's Ellen?" I demanded.

His voice was unperturbed. "You mean Miss Anders, I presume. I am sure I would not know. I have not seen her since yesterday evening."

I almost believed him. Almost. "Don't give me that," I snarled. "I know she's here!"

The black eyes looked straight into mine. "Then you know more than I. Miss Anders is not here. If you do not believe me you are free to search the temple."

"You're damn right I'll search the temple," I told him. I flung him aside and started toward the balcony, leaving him to follow.

That was where I made my mistake. At the third step something came from behind and knocked my hat to the floor just before it crashed against my skull. Something even blacker and deeper than Fatoul's eyes rolled over me and the fog closed in.

I AWOKE to find myself in Fatoul's apartment. It was the same one in which Ellen and I had sat the night before. For a moment I thought it was still the night before because Ellen was still there. After a few minutes, though, the pain in my head subsided a bit and I could see more clearly. Ellen's hands were tied behind her back.

I tried to move. My hands were tied too. So were my feet. I heard somebody groan and then groan again. It was I.

"Dan!" Ellen cried.

"That's me," I croaked. "Dan Riordan, the criminal investigator. Mary Riordan's pride and joy, trussed up like the big ox he is!"

"Oh, Dan, I was afraid you were dead!" Ellen said. "You've been lying there for hours without moving."

"Fortunately for him his skull is thick," a soft voice interrupted.

"You said it," I muttered. "Some detective I am, letting you get behind me like that."

He sat on the divan, next to Ellen, and I squirmed impotently. "We all make mistakes," he comforted me.

"You've made a couple of bad ones yourself," I told him.

"I should be the first to admit it," he agreed. "My greatest mistake, of course, was in engaging such a scrupulous attorney. One more mercenary would have been content to take my money without inquiring into my background."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

Ellen cut in. "I wired the state department to find out if he had ever been issued a passport. They wired back immediately that they had no record of a passport issued under that name. I rushed here to tell him I thought he was a crook and that we wouldn't handle his case. Not only that, I told him

I was going to have him investigated by the police."

"The police are already investigating him," I informed her.

"And what did you find out," Fatoul asked pleasantly.

"I found out what you're up to," I snapped.

He looked honestly surprised. "You did? Then you are more clever than I gave you credit for being. I thought I had covered my tracks perfectly."

I said, "Sure you did. That business with the Red Cross was perfect. So was the obvious fact that your membership was not limited to the wealthy, and the fact that you didn't charge much."

Fatoul started to say something but Ellen interrupted. "But what about the black stone? And the Life Force? How did he do that?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know either what he did to those kids to make them the way they are."

"You've seen the children?" Ellen breathed.

"I have. They're dying of old age. For the sake of his rotten game this 'saint' of yours—"

THAT word brought tears to Ellen's eyes. "Please, Dan. I said that last night while I was under his influence. I didn't know that there was a foul purpose behind those rites."

"Like two children . . ." Fatoul interrupted.

I glared at him. "Don't worry. You'll get yours."

He smiled, showing even white teeth. "I think not. But as you were saying before . . ."

"How I caught on? That was your own fault. If you hadn't insisted that you didn't want guests, that you wanted no one to know what went on here . . . what you were doing in this temple . . ."

Fatoul's eyes widened just a little bit. "Of course!" he said in a sibilant whisper. "That was the crux of the whole matter . . ."

"Maybe I'm dumb," Ellen said, "but as far as I'm concerned it's still a mystery to me. Why was that important?"

"Because when I went to see for myself what happened to those kids I found that everyone around here knew what was going on! And if it was supposed to be such a dark secret how could they know?"

"I'm beginning to see the light," Ellen said. "They knew because . . ."

"Because he made sure they would know!" I supplied. "Once I figured that out I saw the significance of Blair Collinger, the city planner."

Fatoul smiled. "You are clever," he complimented me. "If you had more time I'm certain you would unravel all my secrets."

"Like the secret of staying young," I muttered.

This time Ibn Fatoul laughed openly. "I can assure you that you and Miss Anders will not get a day older," he said.

It took a few seconds for that to percolate through. When it did, I broke out in a cold sweat. He meant what he said. We were just a couple of obstacles in his way and he would remove us without a second thought.

I sparred for time. "You can't get away with that," I said.

"That is a foolish thing to say. I am getting away with it. Thus far no one has come searching for either of you. If anyone should come later . . . you will not be here. It is dark now and it will be simple to dispose of you. At any rate, I have no choice."

I tried to act confident for Ellen's benefit. "Well, we've got until after the rites anyway. By that time . . ."

Fatoul smiled. "There will be no rites tonight. I have called them off. They may not be necessary again at all. The sheep are beginning to run."

The smile wiped off his face and his eyes got blacker than ever. "I think that is all the conversation we shall have," he said softly.

AS THOUGH at a signal, two men came into the room. I had been waiting for them; it was obvious that Fatoul must have accomplices. They were both dark and tall, but younger than Fatoul.

"Gag them," Fatoul ordered.

I tried to resist but it was no go. My man grabbed a handful of hair and pulled my head back. My mouth opened in pain and he stuffed a rag in it. Across from me the other was doing the same to Ellen. In a moment it was done and I was breathing hard through my nostrils.

"You have disposed of his car?" Fatoul asked. My man nodded.

"Good. My car is in back. You know what to do with them."

It was going to take both of them to carry me. As one bent over to take my feet I brought them up sharply into his groin. He doubled over in pain. For a second I felt better. Then the other one smashed his fist into the side of my head. It was sheer agony. I thought the top of my head was coming off. There was a red haze before my eyes and a roaring in my ears.

The haze went away but the roaring continued. I cringed, waiting for another blow. It didn't come and I wondered why. The roaring was louder.

Suddenly the room was still, the three men standing transfixed. I realized that they were listening for something and I listened too. I heard it. It was the roaring noise and I knew then that its source was outside of me,

not in my head.

There was a crashing sound at the temple door and Fatoul got worried. "Go down and see what's going on," he ordered.

One of the men left the room quickly. I could hear him run down the stairs that led down from the balcony outside the room. In a moment he was back.

"There's a mob out in front!" he gasped. "They're trying to break down the door!"

Fatoul's voice was unruffled. "We'll go out the back then. You and I will take Riordan. One can carry the girl."

He came toward me and stopped as a crash sounded from the back of the temple. His eyes got wide and there was fear in them now.

"They must have the place surrounded," he said.

The hammering was rhythmic now. It sounded as though the mob outside was using a ram, possibly a big timber. I heard the inner door of the temple give way a little and the roaring grew loaded.

Fatoul gulped. His face was glistening with sweat and his eyes had lost their intensity. "They're going to get in!" he croaked.

He looked at me. "You're a detective! You can save us!" He worked feverishly, getting the gag out of my mouth. "You can tell them you're a detective, that you are arresting us, that we'll never trouble them again..."

The gag came out. "You can go to hell," I said. "They're only sheep—superstitious foreigners! What are you afraid of?"

The door downstairs gave way and there was a rush of feet into the temple. The roar was loud now, terribly loud. I knew how a French king must have felt, how a Czar must have felt, how Fatoul was feeling now!

He bent over me, fumbling at the

knots that held my hands. The feet were coming up the stairs, the roar with them.

Fatoul was babbling. "You can save us!" He struggled with the knots, his fingers clumsy with fear.

The roar was in the room! I was twisted around with my back to the door and Fatoul was behind me, over me. "You'll tell them . . ." he gasped. "You'll tell them . . ."

I felt something hit him with a sickening crunch and he fell forward on top of me. A red flood poured over my face, into my eyes, blinding me. Nausea swept over me and the lights went out . . .

FOR a few minutes I lay with my eyes closed, afraid to open them. Painfully, things came back. I remembered the roar but it was quiet where I was now. I opened my eyes.

The room was cool, the walls painted a soft peach color. The bed linen was white and crisp. On a couple of chairs near the bed two people sat.

One of them was Doc Finer. For the first time since I had known him his face was freshly shaven. Despite the dark hollows under his eyes he looked nice. On the other chair Ellen sat. Except for the tight, white lines around her eyes she looked the same as ever. She didn't know I was awake and I wanted to watch her for a while.

At last I said, "It's all right to look at me now. I'm awake."

She started, then got up and walked over to me. Without speaking she ran her cool fingers over my forehead. The lines of worry around her eyes faded.

"I'm sorry, Dan," she said finally. "If I'd had sense enough to call instead of getting angry and going there in person you would never have been hurt."

"Who's hurt?" I demanded. "I feel swell. I think I'll get up and we'll go

out for a steak dinner."

"You'll stay where you are," Finer put in. "If you still feel all right tomorrow I might let you get up."

"What's the matter with me?"

"Slight concussion," he said shortly.

"Fatoul must have hit me with a delayed action sap," I grinned.

"What he got hit with took action immediately," Finer told me.

I felt Ellen shudder. "It was horrible," she said. It gave me an excuse to pat her hand. When she didn't move it I let my own stay on it.

"Tell you what," Finer said suddenly. "The reason I'm hanging around is this: I found out what Fatoul did and how he did it. But I'd like to know *why* he did it. Want to trade?"

"You bet," I said. "I'd like to know how to make myself feel younger any time I want to."

"You sound too young already," the doc said drily. "Now tell us how smart you are."

"Well, once I caught on the rest was easy. This is all deduction, of course, but proof should be easy to find. An important clue was the fact that he had been running a cult at the temple for a long time. It was just an ordinary run of the mill kind. Then two years ago he started this rejuvenating business.

"What happened to make him change his set up? If I didn't believe he was sincere—and I couldn't believe that no matter what proofs he had—then he must have had an ulterior motive. What?

"I found out that a man named Blair Collinger, who was a member of this cult, had been named to a city planning commission three years ago. Now what does a commission like that do?"

"I know the answer to that one," Ellen cut in. "The commission is supposed to figure out improvements like new parks, slum clearance projects and

things like that."

FINER had something to say. "I remember that. It's supposed to be a hush-hush affair so that the speculators can't make something on it." He realized what he had just said. "Oh, oh!"

"Exactly," I agreed. "I don't think Collinger was in cahoots with Fatoul, though. I think the old man wanted something else out of the cult and he was getting it. But that meant he was very intimate with Fatoul. So he let slip a little inside information. That section of the city is probably in for big changes."

"Fatoul saw a chance for a real clean-up. He closed up shop for a while and figured out a new slant. When he reopened he had the rejuvenation business. He was careful to stay out of trouble, to avoid the slightest suspicious action."

"If he hadn't told us to keep his rites a secret I would never have caught on. But the minute I started to investigate I found out that everyone in the neighborhood knew about it. So there it was. If they couldn't get rid of Fatoul they'd have to move to save their kids' lives. And they'd sell at Fatoul's price!"

Finer whistled. "That is what I call a diabolical scheme," he said. "And all he needed was a little dope, some incense, and a knowledge of psychology."

"That's your department," I told him. "Explain."

Finer started to rub his chin but there wasn't any stubble there and he put his hand down again, disgusted. He leaned forward in his chair.

"Well, putting you to sleep was easy. He might even have put something in your drink to make you doopey. At any rate, making you stare at something shiny and chant a rhythmic hymn would make you an easy mark for the suggestion that you were sleepy. A little in-

cense didn't hurt either. The musk odor does have an effect on our animal instincts and he gave you a little of that, too."

"Once you were under his influence he could make you wake up whenever he wanted. But he wanted you to feel real peppy when you woke up and he couldn't rely on suggestion alone for that. I had a hunch what it was. That's why I gave you that test; it's the one they give to race horses after a race to make sure they haven't been doped up."

"Say," I asked, "how did that test come out?"

"Your saliva was full of benzidrene sulphate crystals. That's a powerful stimulant."

"But how did he get it in us? You searched for the sign of a hypodermic injection!"

"Fatoul probably figured you'd think of that. He must have used a tube. The stuff went up your nostril and right down to your stomach."

"That sounds too complicated."

Finer snapped his fingers. "Just like that. An experienced man could do it in thirty seconds flat. Want me to show you?"

It sounded as though it would be unpleasant. I said no.

FINER grinned at me. "Anyway, that was the easiest part to figure out. What really stumped me was how he could make a bunch of kids get old!"

"It was possible that he used a drug we know nothing about. But how could it be administered? So that was out. Removal of the vitamins from the food they ate was, as you yourself pointed out, an even greater impossibility."

"That left only one other means: suggestion! That's why I went to the library. I wanted to see if I could find any record of other cases where sugges-

(Continued on page 115)



A man can commit a crime perfectly—it would seem. But there is always a trace left behind. Like the imprint of a hand on a wall

Mark of Cain

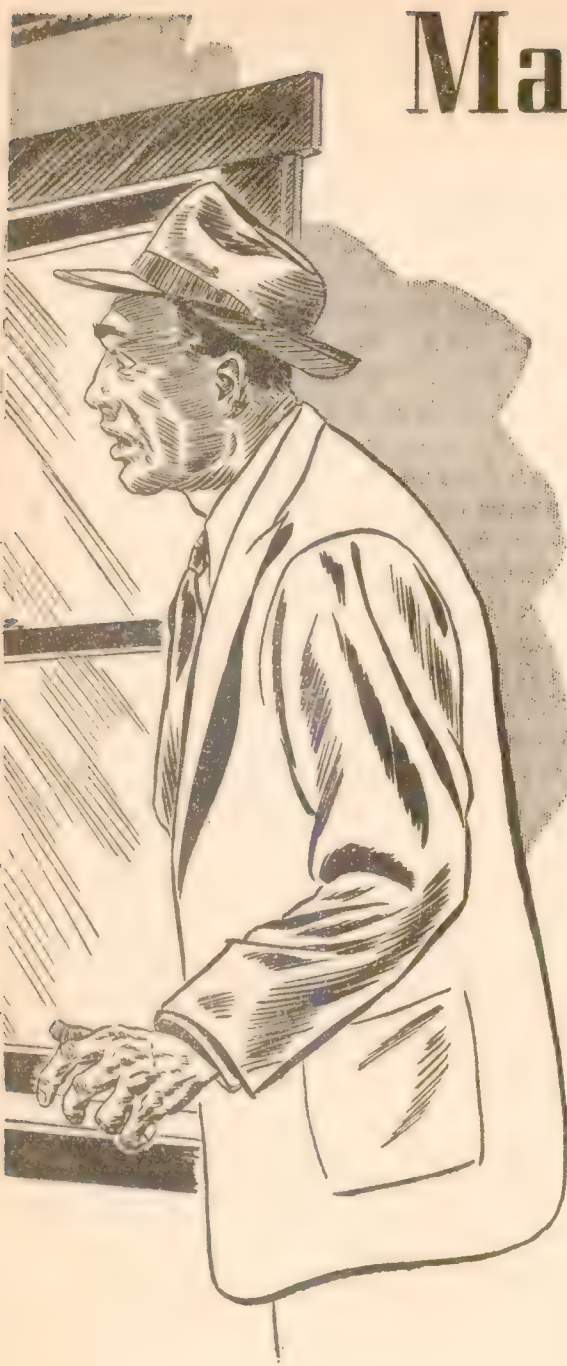
by Arthur Leo Zagat

PROLOGUE

IF THE veterans home from Europe and Japan hadn't needed housing so desperately I would not have taken the contract. Those Greenwich Village alterations are always headaches. Erected a hundred and more years ago, the ancient buildings have joists where no joists ought to be, hidden piping that doubles your plumbing costs, walled-in chimneys where the blueprint calls for kitchenette alcoves. But this house on Vermeer Street— Well, before I was through with it I almost was ready to believe that it had an evil soul of its own, that it fought us with some strange and malignant cunning.

It wasn't only that inexplicable accidents kept happening, like Guiseppe Marrucci's snapping his ankle in a hole in the floor, old Guiseppe' who could move catlike about a dismantled building with his eyes shut. It was—Look! When Tony Lenaro's crew of house-wreckers are working they're like the hands and legs and muscles of a single man. Each knows what he has to do and does it and what he does dovetails into what all the rest are doing as smoothly as the wheels of a fine watch. Now you don't get a bunch of hard-bitten Wops and Micks and Negroes fitting together like that unless over the years there has grown between them mutual respect and understanding and trust.

They weren't in that house three hours before they were snarling at one another. They hadn't been working there two days before Rufe Jackson was



The mark hadn't been noticed until that moment. And a stroke of the brush would have erased it forever—a crime with it

slugging Tim O'Hare and getting slugged back, for no sensible reason either could give us when Tony and I had dragged them apart.

That was only the beginning. It was the same with the carpenters, with the plumbers and steamfitters, the electricians and plasterers and painters. They growled and snapped, they squabbled and fought, and if no one was killed it wasn't because the dark lust to kill had not at some time or other pounded in the skull of every man on that job.

I felt it myself, the very first afternoon when all we'd done was to break away the boards that for a decade had covered the broken-paned windows. For some reason I've forgotten I'd gone alone into the big room to the left of the entrance. A man was in there, his back to me. His hair, once red but now almost wholly gray, curled over the pinned-up collar of a foul and ragged overcoat. His shoes were gray too, and broken, and the stench of rotgut whiskey that hung around him turned my stomach. "Who let you in here?" I demanded.

He ignored me. Motionless and oddly taut, he stared at the grimy imprint, half on cracked plaster, half on a faded remnant of wallpaper, of a palm and five spread fingers. "You," I growled, pounding stiff-kneed toward him. "What do you think you're doing here?"

He turned and the look in his rheum-rimmed, bloodshot eyes stopped me, the *lost* look. "Doing?" The drink-roughened voice rasped nerves I didn't know I had. "Nothing. I just came in to see—"

"Okay," I broke in. "You've seen. Now get out."

"But I want to—"

"Get out!" My own voice was thick with rage. "Get out," I repeated, my fist lifting to mash that sodden face. "Get out or I'll beat you to a pulp," and

I should have done exactly that if a sudden crash hadn't come just then from the entrance hall.

A section of the ceiling had thundered down, missing by inches the skulls of two of Lenaro's men. No one had touched that ceiling. No one had as yet even climbed to the floor above.

By the time things quietened down, the derelict had vanished.

Well, we got the house finished at last. Black marble lobby, indirect lighting, colored tile bathrooms complete. I was ready to turn it over to the owner, clean up the last payments to the sub-contractors and be done with it forever. Starting a last quick trip of inspection, I looked into Apartment 1-A to the left of the entrance and saw Sid Glasser, the boss painter, staring at one of the sidewalls.

Something about him— "What's the matter, Sid?"

"Come in here, John. Come in and look at this." I went in and looked where he pointed and a chill prickle scampered my spine. "Three times," Sid muttered. "Three times we wash off and paint over and there it is so soon the paint dries." On the freshly painted, pastel-green wall was a shadowy smudge. It was shaped like a palm and spread fingers and it was at precisely the same spot where, five months ago, the derelict had stared at it.

New laths, new plaster, only the old bricks behind remained. And this hand-form stain. "What make it we can't paint over it, John Hallam? What is it, that mark?"

"*It's the mark of Cain,*" a rasping voice answered Sid from behind me. "*The mark of the hand of Cain.*"

I WHEELED and saw in the doorway that same derelict. "You, again! What the hell are you hanging around here for?"

"I lived in this house." His whiskey breath stank in my nostrils. "I wanted to tell you about it before but you wouldn't let me."

"Okay. Tell me now."

"It's a long story and I haven't eaten for two days."

"So that's your game, is it? A fairy tale for the price of a meal." The strange, black wrath once more was throbbing in my brain. "Well, I'm not buying. You look starved enough but that's your own fault for spending your money on booze instead of food."

If he'd whined a denial I'd have tossed him out, but he didn't. "Why yes," he said. "When I've funds enough only for one or the other I 'fill the cup that clears today of past regrets and future fears.'"

"Tomorrow?" I capped the quotation. "Why, tomorrow I may be myself with yesterday's sev'n thousand years." And my anger seeped away. "All right." I'm always a sucker for anyone as fond of the Rubaiyat as I am. "There's a lunchroom around on Grove Street. I'll fill your belly there and then I want the yarn."

I got it. Not the whole history of the house on Vermeer Street, only one chapter of it. "This was almost a quarter-century ago," the alcohol-boarsened voice began. "Nineteen twenty-three. In the Spring. . . ."

CHAPTER I

THE faint, sweet fragrance of fresh flowers from Jefferson Market's stalls said only that one more Spring had come to Greenwich Village. The light glowing in Mary Fane's pert small face revealed that this Spring of 1923 was the happiest, most glorious Spring that ever was.

The El train that had stopped at the station above her clattered into motion

again and her eyes became twin black stars as the first of its passengers appeared at the head of the stairs. Racing down to her, Tom Carrol was tall, slim-waisted and wide-shouldered, his hatless hair orange-red flame in the shadows. He swept her into his arms but Mary's small hands thrust against his chest, bent her body backward in a slim and graceful arc. "Not here, darling. Everyone's looking at us."

He put her down, his grin sheepish. Mary shook into order her blue-black Irene Castle bob, touched his lapel with a demure finger. "Did you work hard today, Tom? Are you tired? Are you very hungry?"

"Whoa up, baby." The corners of his blue eyes crinkled. "You sound like a prohibition agent on a hot scent. Why all the questions? What's eating you?"

"Well I thought maybe before we go to the cafeteria, if you aren't too tired and hungry, I thought maybe you'd come somewhere with me first."

"Even if I was starving I'd go anywhere as long's it's with you."

"Come on then." Mary tugged at his sleeve with a child's impatience. "Hurry." But leading him off towards Grove Street, she would answer his questions only with a tantalizing smile.

Hastening through a dusk not yet deep enough for the street lamps, they passed a hurdy-gurdy around which children danced to the tune of "Yes, we have no bananas," open windows that breathed about them the spicy odors of alien condiments, the iron-picketed fence of a dingy synagogue, a dusty shopwindow in which hung reddish-brown, gnarled loops of *salsicce* bologna and the yellow, gourd-like skins filled with the cheese called *provaloni*. Mary urged Tom around a sharp-angled corner into Vermeer Street. "The Three Kittens," Tom read a sign creaking over steps that went down to a wooden base-

ment door into which a diamond-shaped peephole had been cut. "That's one of Duke Martin's joints," and then turned to gape at a sport model Stutz, all crimson paint and gleaming brass, under whose wheel a swarthy man dozed, checked cap pulled low over his weasel's face.

But Mary was calling to him from ten feet farther on. "This is it," she said when he'd caught up to her. "This is the house."

Three stories high and with a dormered attic, its sooted brick was the exact hue of the twilight. Wide windows, open, flanked a doorway that though paintless and scarred with carved initials still was gracefully proportioned. "I'll bite, baby," Tom grinned. "Who lives here?"

"We're going to, after next week. You and me, Tom. It's a beautiful big room on the ground floor and all she's asking for it is eighteen dollars a month, furnished. I—" Mary checked, peering up into his broad-planed face that suddenly had tightened to grimness. "Oh, Tom. You don't like it." His lips quivered. "But how do you know, Tom? You haven't seen it yet."

"I'm not going to." His eyes were miserable. "Look, Mary. We're not getting married next week."

"We're not—" Her hand went to the blue-veined hollow of her throat and from the window over their heads a typewriter pecked at the hush that had closed around them. "It's like this," Tom mumbled. "I've been fired from my job and—"

"Is that all? You silly goose!" Mary's relieved laugh, silvery and tinkling, caught the attention of a flashily-dressed, heavy-set man who climbed the steps from the Three Kittens. "What difference does that make?"

"What difference? All I've got is my last week's pay, twenty-five bucks, and

you're figuring on paying out eighteen for rent alone. That leaves seven. What do we eat on after that's gone?"

"The fifteen a week I'll be getting from Madame La Rose, selling hats."

"Nix," Tom said flatly, too intent to notice that the heavy-set man was padding toward them. "Not on your tin-type. There's heels that let their wives work but I'm not one."

"Only till you find another job. Please be sensible Tom. Please—" Fingers closed on Mary's arm, pulled her around to bluish jowls and thick, moist-looking lips that said, "You're too cute a trick for a punk like this." Small eyes glittered beneath the brim of a fuzzy, bright green fedora. "I know where there's some real champagne, right off the boat, and—" A fist chunked on the close-shaven jaw.

The fuzzy felt hit the pavement first, then its owner landed atop it. Spraddle-legged, Tom saw that the man was knocked out—twisted to a snarling shadow that leaped at him from the slamming door of the Stutz!

Beneath a dark, cap-surmounted face an automatic jabbed at him, stubnosed and inescapable!

CHAPTER II

THE thug jolted sidewise, crumpled down as something bright, oblong, caromed off his skull and was a paperweight of inch-thick glass the instant before it smashed to bits in the gutter. "Inside," a disembodied, low voice commanded. "Get inside the house, quick!" One arm somehow around Mary's waist, Tom Carrol clawed a knob, had the door open and closed behind them before he realized that the voice and therefore the providential paperweight had come from the window over their heads. And then, in the musty murk, recollection of the vicious gun struck panic

through him.

"He—he was going to shoot you." Mary's voice was shrill-edged. "He was going to kill you."

"But he didn't," Tom made his numbed lips say. "Relax, honey. It's all over now."

"*Not if they saw where you went?*" said the voice that had ordered them inside. A vague shape neared them from where a door had thudded shut to their right. "Or aren't you aware who it was you used as a punching bag?"

"I know him all right." Yes, and that was the reason Tom was cold with fear. "Duke Martin may be the Big Shot in this part of town but he ain't monkeying around with my girl while I've still got my health."

"A brave speech, my friend, but—Ahh!" The low, mocking voice cut off as motor thunder hammered at the other side of the street door. "By the noises offstage," it resumed, "we may assume that the redoubtable Duke and his assistant villian, Wee Willie Fowler, failed to observe the direction of your exit." There was a click overhead and grimy light spilled from three tulip-shaped glass shades that, in a chandelier above them, alternated with as many globe-enclosed gas tips.

The man's hand dropped from the dangling cord he'd pulled. He was about thirty, Mary saw, a little taller than Tom, his touselled hair a tawnier red than Tom's, his smile sardonic in a long, narrow face. "You are fortunate, Mr.—er—?"

"Carrol. Tom Carrol."

"I am Hugh Mordred. And the young lady?"

"Mary Fane."

"Mary," Mordred repeated, lingeringly as though tasting the sound of it. "A forthright name. A name redolent of the homely virtues. Marry the girl Tom Carrol, even though you have only

twenty-five 'bucks' in your pocket and must humble your pride while your wife sells hats for Madame La Rose."

"You heard us!" she exclaimed. "You were listening."

"And noting your dialogue to write into some play or other. I warn you that I am a dark and devious knave, a sly fellow not to be trusted. But—" his teasing tones changed texture, "unless my ears deceive me, the Lady of the House is about to make her entrance." Somewhere above on the broad stairs that rose from behind him to obscurity, there was a rustle of taffeta petticoats. "You will tell her, Tom, that you are taking Mary's beautiful room."

"Hey!" Tom growled. "I don't see what you come off to—"

"Interfere in your affairs? Well, the Chinese believe that he who saves a life is ever after responsible for for the welfare of its owner. But let me put it this way. If you hadn't been beside Mary, two minutes ago, who would have protected her from Duke Martin? She needs you, Tom."

"Oh, I do, Tom." Mary's hand was on his arm. "I need you so much that I'm not ashamed to beg—"

"Ah, Princess!" Mordred was bowing to the tall woman who rustled down the last flight of stairs, spare and ramrod-straight. "I hope I see you well this evening."

"Quite well, thank you." Her gray hair was combed straight back to a hard bun, her scrawny neck was clasped by the boned high collar of a white lawn shirt-waist and the otherwise smooth skin of her face was netted with fine wrinkles. "And you, Mr. Mordred?"

"Thank you. You know Miss Fane, I believe. May I present her fiance, Tom Carrol? This is Princess Kate, Tom, who prefers to be known more simply as Mrs. Katherine Noll."

"Good evening." The tip of her long

nose twitched like a rabbit's as she unfastened a huge key ring from the belt of her black alpaca skirt and turned to Tom. "If you'll come this way—"

"Never mind, ma'am," Tom broke in. "I don't want to look at it." A sob lumped in Mary's throat. "If Mary likes it, that's good enough for me. I'll pay the first month's rent now, because we'll be moving right in. We're getting married tomorrow."

"Bravo!" Patting noiseless palms, Hugh Mordred's twisted grin made him look more like a shirt-sleeved satyr than ever. "I couldn't myself have written a better curtain speech for Act One."

Why Act One, Mary wondered. It's always the end of the play when the boy and girl get married. Mrs. Noll said, "I'll write you a receipt, Mr. Carrol," and they moved to an onyx-topped console that stood against the staircase wall. Mary turned back to Mordred to ask him why he'd said Act One, but the words froze on her lips. He was looking up to the head of the stairs and his smile was suddenly as artificial as if painted on his face.

The way the light slanted up into the darkness, Mary could make out only the face up there, a gaunt, hollow-cheeked, pallid face that sent a chill shudder through her—and vanished.

All of a sudden she was afraid, but she didn't know of what she was afraid.

CHAPTER III

HUGH MORDRED came out of his room—turned to the opening street door, "Well, Tom," he exclaimed. "You certainly look like good news."

"You tell 'em shoe, I'm tongue-tied." Tom Carrol grinned from ear to ear. "Gees, Hugh, I don't know how to thank you."

"What for? All I did was give you a letter to Ron Adair. He's taking you

on, I gather."

"He sure is. I start tomorrow, taking tickets and sort of overseeing the cleaning up after the last show. Gee, I can't wait till Mary comes home so's I can tell her. There's one thing she won't like, though."

"The hours, eh?"

"Yeah. Six p.m. till around two in the morning. I'll be leaving before she gets back from work and still asleep when she goes. We won't scarcely get a chance to see each other except Sundays."

"Aren't you forgetting that she promised to quit her job as soon as you found one?"

"That's right. I didn't think—" The grin returned, sheepish now. "Gosh, ain't I the dumb-ox though? Gee, Hugh. When I think how down in the dumps I was the first time I stood in this hall, just a week ago, and now look. I've got the swellest little wife in seven states and a honey of a job and even Duke Martin's been pinched so I don't have to worry about him no more. Don't think I'm forgetting, either, that outside of the last I owe it all to you."

"Skip it, fellow." Hugh Mordred's arm went affectionately around Tom's shoulder. "You don't owe me a thing." But as he turned and started climbing the stairs, the curve of his thin mouth was faintly ironic.

That sardonic smile still lingered as he relit his pipe and tossed the match out of the third-story window beside his tipped-back chair. "You're working yourself into a lather about nothing, John Scanlon."

"I tell you she was up here last night, snoopin'." Tiny light-worms crawled beneath the surface of the eyes in Scanlon's gaunt, hollow-cheeked face but his bluish lips did not move with the monotone. "I heard her." In sweat-wet pajamas, he crouched on the edge of the

iron cot that with a decrepit dresser and a paintless washstand made up the furnishings of the room. "An' when I cracked the door she was out there."

"Of course. But not snooping. Mrs. Noll said something about forgetting to leave clean towels in your bathroom and Mary offered to save her the climb. That's all there was to that."

"Says you. I say this guy Carrol's a Fed an' she's his pigeon. Look how the Three Kittens next door gets raided not five days after they move in here, an' just when Duke Martin's in there collectin' the take. If they didn't put out the tip, I'd like to know who did."

Mordred blew a smoke ring, watched it flatten itself against the dresser's specked mirror. "I did."

"You!" Incredulity the first time. "You!" A sudden squeal of maniac fury as Scanlon's hand flashed under the rumpled pillow, reappeared clutching an open clasp-knife. He leaped across the room. "You're the rat—"

"Easy, John." Mordred's murmur held the knife, quivering. "Take it easy, you fool." If his chair tipped down, if he betrayed the slightest fear, the gleaming steel would slice down. "If you kill me, who'll buy the stuff for you that keeps the black horror asleep in your brain?"

THE lank form still hung over him, tensed as a bowstring. "You'd have to go out for it yourself," Mordred murmured, "out into the street. And they'd see you, John. They'd see you and nab you and take you back to—"

"No!" Scanlon squealed. "Don't say the name of that place."

"All right, John, I won't say it. But don't you forget that without me you'll go back behind those walls and this time They won't let you go again. You can't kill me, John Scanlon, much as you'd like to. You don't dare."

"No," Scanlon whispered, his arm dropping. "I don't dare." He turned away, stumbling back to his cot, Mordred chanced a quick dab of his sleeve to wipe the cold sweat from his brow but when the gaunt man had sunk again to the bed's edge, the knife concealed once more, the other puffed contemplatively on his pipe apparently unperturbed.

There was a long moment's silence in the room, then, "Why, Hugh? Why'd you finger the Three Kittens for the Feds?"

Mordred let smoke trail leisurely from his lips. "Perhaps because I wanted to study, first hand, how people act when the speakeasy they're in is raided. There was one fat woman," he chuckled, "who scrambled under a little table with the first axe blow and stayed there with her huge posterior sticking out in everyone's way. And—"

"You're a devil, straight out of Hell!"

"No. Merely a writer so devoid of imagination he needs to find in real life the characters of his plays and create for them the situations their reaction to which he wishes to describe. All of which, my friend, I have told you before, explaining why I keep you here and wait on you. And which is why I persuaded the Carrols to live here under my eyes and obtained for Tom a job that will keep him away all evening—"

"So you can play the dame, huh?"

"Wrong again, John. Mary is nothing to me but a guinea pig for a laboratory experiment in human behavior. Here are two young people very much in love, and with the same background of education, or lack of it. What will happen if one forges ahead of the other in intellectual attainment, as I shall see to it that she does? Will their love die or will it be strong enough to bring about some happy adjustment? What-

ever happens, it will furnish me material for a drama with the breath, the authentic, warm tingle of life. Now do you understand?"

"Yeah." The gaunt man stared at him. "I get it. You've got a queer idea you can play God."

"That's it!" Mordred's fist smacked into his palm. "That's exactly it. As far as that man and that woman are concerned, I propose to be a little god, as coldly emotionless as Omar's Destiny which plays with men for pieces on Life's checker board, 'Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays' without hate or love or any trace of sympathy. Amazing that you should grasp it so exactly."

"Why shouldn't I? I once played God myself, to a woman. Or thought I did." Scanlon's pinpoint-pupiled eyes drifted away, were gazing past Mordred into some vista of time and space unfathomed. "Thought I did. I was wrong. That's the way They work."

Under the pallid skin of his face tiny muscles writhed as with an eerie life of their own. "That's the way They work," he repeated. "They send you a woman, pretty an' soft an' warm, with a red mouth an' a white throat an' a perfume that gets into your brain an' your blood till you're half-crazy with wantin' her. An' you can't buy the things that she wants but you get 'em for her. You got to, 'cause you got to have her. An' then, while you hold her in your arms, deaf with her whispers, blind with her kisses, They come creepin' in the night. An' all of a sudden, *They've got you!*"

His breath wheezed as he pulled it in. "An' when They're draggin' you away you hear her laughin' at you, laughin' in the dark. You keep hearin' that laugh, that silvery, tinklin' damned laugh in your cell an' in the exercise yard an' even in solitary. You keep hearin' it night an' day, night an' day, till They

let you out.

"It stops then, for a while, but you know you'll hear it again. You know she's watchin' you, watchin' an' waitin' till you'll think you're safe from Them an' then, one night, she'll be ready. You know that night you'll hear her laugh again an' They'll be back to take you away again, to lock you up again in that place. An' you know the only way you'll ever be safe from Them is if you slice her white throat so she can't laugh no more."

He stopped, the light-worms doing a devil's dance in his pale eyes. "Splendid," Mordred applauded. "That speech is exactly the sort of thing I hoped to get from you. I must—"

"Listen!" Scanlon husked, twisting to the window. "Listen," he repeated, staring out into the night. "Do you hear that laugh?"

"Your woman again?"

"No," the blue-tinged lips whispered. "Not mine, Hugh. Yours."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS grand of you to get Princess Kate and the girls from upstairs passes to see Alice Brady in Zander the Great." Wrapped in a voluminous Mother Hubbard apron, black curls peeping from beneath a mob-cap, Mary Carrol looked more like a little girl playing house than a woman married now for almost two months. "But you're so swell to everyone, Hugh." Standing atop a kitchen stepstool Mordred held steady for her, she scrubbed at the wall with a handful of white bread kneaded to dough. "Look what you've done for Tom and me. I don't mean just getting him his job. You've taught us—me anyway—about so many things I never even knew existed and you've made me want to know more and more."

She paused to examine the result of her labors, pert head cocked to one side. The glowing carbon filaments in the overhead fixture spread yellow light over the gay chintz curtains she'd hung at the wide window, over the India-print coverlet on the big double bed and the red and white checkered cloth covering the square dinner-table. Mary had even pasted a bright pattern of cigar bands on the screen that concealed the cast-iron sink, wooden icebox and two-burner gas plate at the door end of the room, but the grimy walls still had made the high-ceiled room gloomy and she'd decided to do something about that.

"It is a lot cleaner," she decided. "I do hope I can get it all finished tonight. Tom never turns on the light when he comes in but I want him to be surprised when he wakes up. Maybe he won't be so crabby—"

She caught that back and hastily resumed her scrubbing but Mordred, sucking on an unlighted briar, gave no sign he'd noticed. "So," he murmured instead, "I actually have opened up new vistas for you."

"Of course you have. Our long talks evenings, and the books you've loaned us to read—"

"Us!" Hugh broke in, a muscle twitching at the corner of his mouth. "Don't tell me Tom has been reading them."

"Well, one rainy afternoon I talked him out of playing casino and read from Omar's Rubaiyat to him instead. He liked it so much he's learning it by heart. You should have heard him this afternoon, Hugh, spouting, 'A loaf of bread beneath the bough, a jug of wine—' and so on."

"With gestures, I'm sure."

"With gestures," Mary agreed, giggling. "It was funny, but sweet." She came down a step. Her apron's hem brushed Hugh's ear and the warm,

sweet perfume of her was strong in his nostrils. "You know what I was just thinking, Hugh? I was wondering what old Omar would say if he could see what I'm doing with a loaf of bread."

"Well," he mused, shifting as if to avoid the rain of begrimed particles. "He might be inspired to compose a quatrain. Something like this, perhaps:

*Who knows, Beloved, but that this very
bread
Was baked from grain that on the dust
hath fed
Of one who yesteryear within these
walls did weep,
So serves now to erase the tears Herself
did shed?"*

"That's wonderful, Hugh! Did you make it up just now, all yourself? Honestly?"

"Honestly. It's a poor thing but my own and, if I do say it myself, hardly more meretricious than most of the Tentmaker's own philosophical jingles. Speaking of philosophy, what does Tom make of Will Durant's Story of Philosophy?"

"Oh, when I tried to read that to him, he fell asleep." A secretive smile of satisfaction crossed Mordred's sharp features. "But I love it—Oh, dear. This spot simply refuses to come out, no matter how hard I rub it. The paper's clean all around it but—I don't like it, Hugh." Uneasiness crept into her voice. "It—it gives me the creeps. Look. It's exactly the shape of a spread-fingered hand."

"So it is. But why should that perturb you?"

"Because—Oh, I don't know. I've a queer feeling that the hand that left it there had just done something so—so evil that it stained the house forever. I—" Mary broke off with a nervous little laugh. "That's very silly, isn't it."

"I don't know." Letting go of the stool, Mordred straightened. "I—don't—know." Some obscure excitement quivered in his voice. "You know, Mary, I think that you've given me an idea for—for a Grand Guignol sort of horror one-acter. Let me see. I could call it *The Mark of Cain's Hand*. No, too long. How's *The Mark of Cain*?"

"Please! Please, Hugh, stop talking about it. I don't want to think about it any more. I don't want to see it—I know! That picture I bought in the five and dime today, a woman sitting on top of the world playing a harp, I'll hang that over it. Right now."

SHE started down off the stepstool and it slid, threw her against Mordred. His pipe dropped unnoticed as he caught her in his arms. Her slim body was firm but yielding. Her half-parted, dusky lips were very near his own—

She stiffened, twisted away from him. Not in rejection, however. She was staring with dilating pupils at the door. There was a sound in Hugh's throat, the beginning of a word, but Mary's hand jerked up. "Hush," and now he heard it, a barely audible hiss of movement retreating in the hall outside.

The door was not quite closed. He had taken care to shut it very firmly after he had brought in the stepstool.

"Someone was out there," Mary whispered. "Listening. Spying on us."

"Nonsense." Hugh's laugh lacked conviction. "There isn't a soul in the house." No one but John Scanlon. "It was just a draft from somewhere." Nostrils pinched, he strode to the door and flung it open. "See. The hall's deserted." But he'd been just in time to see a shadow flit out of sight, up there on the stairs' first landing. "Who on earth do you think would be spying on us?"

"Who?" Mary was still pale, still wide-eyed. "There was an item in this

morning's *World* about Duke Martin's case being postponed again. He's out on bail, isn't he? Suppose he's found out that Tom lives here—"

"Good Lord, Mary!" Why this sudden rage that flared in him? "Martin's got other things to think about than revenging himself for something that happened weeks ago. You're—you're childish. You—" He checked himself, forced a smile. "You certainly have a wonderful imagination, my dear. And that reminds me of that sketch you suggested to me. *The Mark of Cain*." He must get away from her before he should spoil all he'd carefully built up. "Will you excuse me if I go to my room and get started on it?"

"Of course, Hugh." She tried a smile too, wistful, trembling. "I don't feel like working any longer, anyway. I'll just have to forget about surprising Tom. But thank you for helping me, Thank you for everything."

CHAPTER V

ARRIVING home at a quarter to three, Tom Carrol was surprised to find the lights still on in the hall. He could hear Hugh's typewriter going, but that—"Why hello, Mrs. Noll," he exclaimed. "You still up?"

She'd come from the direction of her room, behind the staircase. "It is terribly late for me, isn't it?" Her long-sleeved dress of black lace contrasted oddly with the pile of folded bedsheets she carried. "But I've got to check and put away the laundry or my routine tomorrow will be quite upset. You see, I didn't get home until well after midnight. Mr. Mordred gave us all passes to the theatre and the girls insisted on treating me to coffee and buns afterwards."

"So you gals have been stepping out," Tom grinned. "I'll bet Mary didn't

drink no coffee though. It always keeps her awake."

"Oh, your dear little wife wasn't with us. She was bent and determined on—" Mrs. Noll caught herself just in time to save giving away Mary's surprise, "on finishing the book she was reading."

"Those blame books! The way she keeps reading, reading all the time's beginning to get my nanny." Tom was scowling now. "That's all she ever does nowadays. I don't get it. I don't get it at all. Well, I better be grabbing some shuteye before 'morning in the bowl of night has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight,' like old Omar says. 'Night, Mrs. Noll.'"

"Good night, Mr. Carrol."

He was careful to open and close the door of their room silently but Mary's whisper came out of the darkness, "That you, Tom?"

"Who else?"

"Why're you so late, dear?"

"I was turkey-trotting at the Astor with Elaine Hammerstein." He didn't quite know why sudden irritation rasped his voice, why his knees suddenly were stiff as he stumped toward the bed. "Or maybe I'm late because I walked home to save a jit—Ouch!" The stepstool had cracked him across the shin. "What the blue blazes? You been moving the furniture again?"

"Oh, Tom!" Mary's bare feet thudded as she sprang from the bed. "I forgot—Did you hurt yourself, darling?"

"Wonder I didn't break my leg." Mary clicked on the light and Tom bent to pull up his pants leg and assay the damage. "Damn it! You ought to have more sense than to leave—Hu, uh." He was rigid suddenly, staring down at the floor. "How did that get here?"

"I borrowed it from Mrs. Noll. I was cleaning—"

"Not this." He picked up something

from the floor, straightened. "You didn't borrow this from that old hag." He thrust at Mary a gnarled briar pipe, the bit grooved by long use. "If it isn't Mordred's, I'm a ring-tailed baboon."

"Of course it is. He must have dropped it when I tripped."

"He was in here with you?"

"Why, yes." The sleep-fuzzed eyes were puzzled at Tom's harsh tone. "Most of the evening. He— Why are you looking at me like that, Tom?" Mary's hand went to the nubile curve that was scarcely concealed by her filmy nightgown. "Oh, Tom, you silly goose, you don't think—"

"I *didn't* think, you mean. Not till now." The syllables were hard against his palate. "I didn't stop to think why he's always lending you books he has to explain what they mean, buzz, buzzing around you all the time. Books!" He was shouting now. "Him and his damn books!"

"Hush, Tom. You'll wake everybody up."

"So I'll wake them up." But his tone lowered to a deep-throated growl that was even more frightening. "Yeah. I didn't think what he was up to with his tricks, getting me a job keeps me out half the night, giving Noll and that dried-up gang of old maids passes so they'll clear out and leave you two alone—"

"No-o-o. That's not you, that's not my Tom talking like that."

"Damn right I'm not your Tom! Why, you little tramp." He took a step toward her, his fist lifting. "I ought to—"

"Tom!" Her cry, low but imperative, halted him. "Look at me." Tiny, her body still unformed, maidenly within the clinging, sheer silk, there still was a strange, new dignity about her that surmounted her deep hurt and denied it. "Look at me, Tom, and try

to realize what you're saying."

He looked. For a long, long minute he stared at her, short black hair tousled about her pale, still face, gaze level and frank and unflinching. And then his lifted fist opened and dropped and he shook his head as though to clear it.

"Gosh, Mary," he heard himself say. "I—," and said no more because her bare white arms were raised to him and her slender body was so shaken by sobs that his arms must fold it and it close to him. . . .

OUT in the hall, Katherine Noll turned from the door through which she'd been unable to help hearing Tom Carrol's harsh voice. The tip of her nose twitched furiously as she put down her burden of sheets on the onyx-topped console and went to that other door from behind which the rapid pecking of a typewriter had never ceased and knocked on it.

Her first rap had no effect but the second brought silence. "It's Mrs. Noll," she called covertly. "May I come in?"

Hugh Mordred, in pajama trousers and nothing else, removed a dilapidated dictionary from a club chair hardly less disreputable. "Make yourself comfortable, Princess, and tell me what's on your mind."

"Thank you." But she remained standing, straight-backed and intransigent. "Mr. Mordred. You must stop what you are doing to Mary and Tom Carrol. You must stop trying to destroy their happiness."

"Ahh." A blue-gray wisp of smoke trailed from the calabash clenched between his teeth. "You surprise me, Princess. You are more observant than I thought."

"More observant and less gullible, Hugh Mordred. Much less gullible than the parole officer who swallows your

statement that the deep sleep in which he always finds the man on my third floor is due to illness rather than to the narcotic with which you supply him. But John Scanlon is a lost soul and so I have seen no reason to report what I know to the authorities. Those two young people are different."

"Very much different. I quite agree."

Katherine Noll relaxed. "You will let them alone, then? You will permit them to work out their own lives, unhampered?"

Mordred speared a string of smoke rings with a skillful jet, smiled almost wistfully. "No, Princess," he said gently. "I shall continue that experiment as well as the other and you will meddle with neither." The smile vanished. "Because if you should carry out your implied threat, I in turn should be compelled to publish certain yellowed documents I happen to have found concealed beneath the floor of your quaint, dormered attic."

The tip of the woman's nose stopped twitching. Her lips moved but made no sound.

Hugh Mordred sighed. "I think we understand each other now," he murmured.

"No." She was barely audible. "But I understand you and that is enough."

His sardonic smile was by the merest shade not as assured as usual. "As long as you do not interfere with me, it is enough. Good night, Princess Kate."

"Good night."

CHAPTER VI

MAYBE it was what he'd seen last night that made John Scanlon so uneasy. Twice during the morning he left off pacing his narrow, cell-like room, after listening at the door to make sure no one was in the hall outside. Both times he went to the window at the rear

of the hall. The first time, the clink of Mrs. Noll's keys on the staircase sent him scurrying back. The second time he leaned out to examine the iron ladder whose installation the Tenement House Department had ordered after a succession of fatal lodging house fires.

Bracketed to soot-blackened rough brick, it went down to a dreary back yard from which one could reach Grove Street by squeezing through holes in three broken wood fences. Yes. He could get out this way if They came.

When They came. They were coming soon, maybe tonight. Scanlon could feel it in his bones. He could feel it in the musty air of the house, a tight kind of feel like just before Baby-Face Barkley and his pals tried their Big Break. He wasn't quite sure it would be tonight but whenever They came he'd be warned in time by her laugh, her tinkling, silvery laugh.

He must be sure and get out before she came to him or she'd keep him there for Them.

HUGH MORDRED'S typewriter had clicked all through the night and through the morning and mid-afternoon, except for the brief interval of his visit to the third floor bearing in a fold of paper certain white crystals as light as the stuff of dreams, as glistening as the sheen of death. At about three-fifteen he came out and went to the coin-slot telephone on the wall of Kate Noll's room, behind the stairs. When his nickel, pinging into the box, brought the operator's, "Number, plee-uhz," he asked for one in the Longacre exchange.

The individual for whom he inquired had gone to Newark for the tryout of a new dance act and then was due at the Bronx Opera House to catch a couple of Jap acrobats. Was there any message? "Yes. Tell him I'll meet him at Lindy's at midnight. And tell him to be sure

to have his checkbook along. I've done the horror sketch for which he's been plaguing me and it's good."

Mordred cradled the receiver, turned and saw Mary Carrol coming toward him, graceful in a flowered gingham house dress. "Hello! Why so sober?"

"You left this behind, last night." She held out his pipe. "And you'd better take these too." 'These' were three books; the Durant, the second volume of Wells' Outline of History and a vellum-bound copy of the Rubaiyat.

Only Hugh's eyes moved, from books to pipe to the girl's dark, unsmiling face. "I see. It was careless of me to leave my pipe in your room for Tom to find."

"Please, Hugh. Please take them and let me go back to him."

"To play casino? Very well." But by letting her still hold them, he held her there. "If that is what you want."

"What I want doesn't matter. He's my husband."

"Of course. And you're nothing but his wife. When he put that ring on your finger he took possession not only of your body but of your mind too. Is that it, Mary?"

Her eyes came up to meet his and there were unshed tears in them and behind the tears resignation. "That has to be it. I have no right to hurt him."

"Granted. But you need not. An issue does not have to be fought out when it can be avoided. Let me have those." Mordred relieved the girl of the pipe and the books. "You need a rest from this sort of thing. Tonight, after Tom has left, I shall bring you a volume that will show you there is also gaiety to be found in the world I've helped you to discover." And with this he turned and was gone into his room before she could respond.

WHEN Mary's door had closed on her, another opened, in the shad-

owy region behind the stairs. Mrs. Noll emerged, black bonnet perched atop her gray bun, long black coat buttoned about her scrawny frame, lisle-gloved hand grasping the handle of a sisal mesh shopping bag. Moving toward the street door without haste although she was fifteen minutes late for her marketing, her colorless lips were pressed together in a grim line and there was in her sidewise glance at Mordred's door a quality at once defiant and ominous.

An hour later, Katherine Noll sat primly erect on the edge of a chair in a hotel room on Twenty-third Street. A weasel-faced man lounged against the door, a cherubic countenanced youth of about eighteen sat on the bed cleaning a revolver and in the wide-armed chair she faced a thick-set, bluish-jowled man blinked eyes like agates. "How do you know this?" he asked.

"The telephone is just outside my room, Mr. Martin, and the wall is very thin. 'Here's the tip I promised you,' I heard him say. 'The Big Shot's just entered the Three Kittens carrying the little black bag everyone knows he uses for his collections. One man went in with him and Wee Willie is sitting in the Stutz at the curb.' Then he hung up and went out and less than ten minutes later I heard the crash of axes as the officers battered in the door of the speakeasy. Loop, Mr. Martin. I don't want any trouble near my house and there doesn't have to be. At midnight tonight he will be in Lindy's restaurant on Broadway."

"Hell," the man at the door exclaimed. "Broadway's lousy with cops—" but a motion of Martin's hand stilled him. "You heard the lady. She don't want trouble on her block." He turned back to her. "What does this rat look like?"

"He is slender and quite tall. He has red hair and never wears a hat."

"Vermeer Street," the thick lips murmured. "Red hair. I got a hunch I know the punk and why he turned me in. But how about you? What's your percentage?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're no cutie looking to even up with the boy friend because he's ditched her for another tomato, so what are you after?"

Her nose-tip stopped twitching. "Do I have to answer that?"

"Yes, lady. You ain't got no use for the likes of me, so I got to know what's your idea bringing me this squeal."

"Well-ll." The real story was too complex, he wouldn't believe it. Make it simple. "I—I have a daughter whom he—who's infatuated with him and—"

"A daughter, uh," Martin caught at the word. "She wouldn't be a pint-size trick would she, with a black bob and a swell little shape?"

"How did you know?" The woman's sere calm was shaken. "When did you ever see her?"

"Look, it's me that's asking the questions." Martin's heavy lids drooped. "But I've got enough." He drummed on the arm of his chair. "Yeah. Listen. You got an empty room in that lodging house?"

"Why yes. The hallroom on the second floor. But why—?"

"Oh, I just figure it might be a good idea to have one of my boys on tap in case you get to thinking things over. Willie!" He turned to the weasel-faced man. "You go along—No," he checked himself. "I'll need you for something else. You, Pinkie. Carting that old suitcase of mine, you'll look like a rube from Podunk. Go get it."

"Aw gee, boss. I—"

"Go get it, Pinkie," Duke Martin murmured, and there was that in his low tone which tightened the skin at the nape of Katherine Noll's neck.

CHAPTER VII

THE single, slow bonn-ng of the Jefferson Market Tower clock welled clearly in through the windows of the house on Vermeer Street, open to the sultry summer night. It was one-thirty.

John Scanlon heard it, pacing the floor of his cell, listening for the sound of a woman's laugh. Katherine Noll heard it in her lonely bed behind the stairs, staring with wide and burning eyes at memories she'd thought long buried. The new lodger in the hall room one flight up heard it.

Mary Carrol heard but was not aware of the stroke of the ancient clock, too absorbed in the book over which her curly black head was bent. Shoeless feet tucked under her but otherwise wholly dressed, she nestled among the cushions of the window seat Tom had built for her and read by the light of the little lamp Tom had made and bracketed to the side of the casement. This was the only light in the room.

Hugh Mordred had brought the book to the door shortly after Tom had left for work. She'd taken it from him but had not invited him in. He'd not asked to come in. He'd said, "You'll enjoy this, Mary," and was gone before she'd had a chance to refuse it—if she would have refused it.

Hugh was right about the book. Mary had been chuckling for hours over this Mr. Pickwick and the funny people he was meeting on his travels. She was very far away from Vermeer Street and Tom and Hugh and heartache. The undying magic of a sorcerer with words had her fast in its spell.

* * *

In Lindy's restaurant on Broadway, H. Montague Flasher turned down the last page of the manuscript he'd been reading since a little past midnight. "Not bad," he muttered. "Not bad at

all."

"Not bad?" Hugh Mordred exclaimed. "If you say that, I know it must be perfect. It is exactly what you have been looking for. Keokuk will love the Mark of Cain and Peoria will flock to it. It will run two years on the Keith circuit and it will cost you a thousand dollars."

"Don't make me laugh. I wouldn't give my own brother more than half a G for this turkey."

"I'm not your brother and so the price still is a thousand."

"Six hundre'l and not a cent—Hey, give me that!" Mordred had reached across the table and plucked the script from Flasher's beringed fingers. "I want it."

"Listen, my friend. I haven't slept since ten yesterday morning and it is twenty to two now. At precisely a quarter of two I shall be descending the steps of the Fiftieth Street subway station on my way home to bed and I shall have in my pocket either this script or your check for a thousand dollars. The choice is yours."

"All right, you red-headed bandit. Lend me your fountain pen."

THE tune of My Melancholy Baby kept running through Tom Carrol's carrot-thatched head. It reminded him of Mary. Gosh, he'd sure acted lousy to her last night. What the devil had got into him?

The charwomen were starting in on the lobby. A quarter hour more and he could lock up. Tom glanced at the clock on the wall over the poster of Jackie Coogan in Circus Days. Ten of two. He'd be out of here by five after, home by half past. The devil! He'd shoot a nickel and take the El, save ten minutes at least.

Was Mary asleep, he wondered.

Mary was giggling over the Fat Boy's

efforts to make the deaf old lady understand whom it was that Mr. Tupman had been dallying with in the arbor. Finally he succeeded. "Not my da'ater!" she shrilled.

"*The train of nods,*" Mary read, "*which the fat boy gave by way of assent communicated a blanc-mange like motion to his fat cheeks.*" She could see that, clear as anything, and it was so comical that she laughed aloud, a silvery, tinkling laugh.

. . . John Scanlon twisted to his third story window. *That laugh*, silvery and tinkling. It was real this time. She was down there, down in the street. She'd found him at last.

He flattened himself against the casement, peered out and down. The street was dim and desolate and empty—No! The street itself was deserted but in the black pit of a doorway across the gutter he made out a blacker shape and now the pale blob of a face. In the mouth of the alley between that building and the next there was another. They were watching the house, watching and waiting for her signal. She had brought Them here at last, just like he'd always known she would.

What was it he was going to do when—Oh, yes. The iron ladder at the back of the house, the way out to Grove Street . . . His clothes . . . Mustn't forget to put them on. Get his knife first, from under the pillow. Have it handy in case. . . .

A sudden sound, deep, appalling, welled in out of the night. Scanlon snarled, the blade lifting in his hand. The sound came again. A bell, only the bell of the Jefferson Market clock, striking.

The second stroke hummed to silence. Mary Carrol waited for another but it did not come. Two o'clock then. Tom would be home any minute now. She jumped to her feet, fingers at the fasten-

ing of her frock. If he found her up and dressed, he'd know she'd been reading again and—Footfalls thudded out there, not near yet but clear in the nocturnal hush.

Tom already? Early for a change?

Mary switched off the light, thrust the Pickwick Papers under cushions and leaned out to see if it was Tom or if she had time to find a safer hiding place for the book. The shadowy figure from which the footfalls came was halfway here from the corner. Not tall enough to be Tom. Not Hugh either—Mary's throat tightened.

He'd come into light from the street lamp just beyond where the Three Kittens used to be and she saw the thin, ferret-like face she would never forget.

It was silly to be scared just because Wee Willie was walking past. It didn't mean that—"Watch yourself." He hadn't stopped or turned his head and he was alone, but that whisper came from him. "*Don't get trigger-happy and blast the wrong guy.*" Mary saw the shadow now, thrown by some trick of reflected light on the basement steps beside him, the shadow of a half-crouched man. "*This punk's got red hair.*"

Mary Carrol whimpered, far back in her throat.

. . . John Scanlon whimpered, animal-like, as he jerked viciously at a sock, so viciously that it tore over his heel.

The *scrrt* of the ripping fabric was loud to his drug-sensitized ears. Too loud. He snatched up his knife and whirled to the door. Had she heard it and guessed how he meant to fool her? Was she calling Them in to rush silently up the stairs?

His clawed left hand took hold of the doorknob, with infinite care turned it—slowly, soundlessly—, slowly pulled the door open till it was ajar by four inches.

He strained to listen, crouched and trembling.

IT'S only just two, Mary remembered. Maybe Tom hasn't left the theatre yet. Maybe there's still time to phone and warn him.

She ran across the dark room, grateful that her stockinged feet made no sound—bumped into the kitchenette screen! It swayed, toppled, but she caught it somehow, somehow steadied it, somehow was around behind it and was groping along the icebox top for the change she'd left there after paying the grocer's boy.

Where was it? Dear God, where—? A quarter dropped to the floor with an appalling clatter but she had the nickel. She was out in the hall, dark, filled with ominous shapes. She fled past them, found the phone box on the wall back of the stairs, found the slit for the coin. It pinged loudly as she snatched the receiver to her ear. Could they hear it? Never mind. Remember Tom's number. Watkins—Watkins 962.

The operator didn't ask for it. Oh, hurry. Still no "Number, plee-uz?" The receiver was dead against Mary's ear. She waggled the hook, too desperate now to care whether Duke Martin's men heard her or not. "*No use, sister,*" someone said. "*The wire's cut.*"

The light came on as Mary swung to the voice and saw the new roomer's hand drop from the dangling cord. He came off the stairs and turned to her, a pink-cheeked boy, round eyes blinking as though a bit bewildered with the city's noise and bustle. "Help me," she sobbed. "You've got to help me."

* * *

Crouched at the door, John Scanlon heard a man's voice down below and the slit through which he peered brightened with faint glow. Now a woman's voice came to him.

He couldn't make out what she said but he didn't have to hear. He knew. Once again she was telling Them where he was, once again betraying him. Soon she'd be coming to him, white-skinned and black-haired and the perfume of her would steal away his brains, her kisses would blind and deafen him while They crept in the night to take him.

And he'd hear her laugh as They dragged him back to that place.

He had to get out of here before she came. He had to get out quick, shoes or no shoes. But his fear chained him here, his fear and his longing for her. The longing for her was a fever in his veins, sapping his strength to move.

Her voice again. If he could only hear what she was saying.

* * *

"You can help me," Mary babbled out her new hope. "Wee Willie doesn't know you, he'll let you pass. Listen. There are gangsters outside, waiting—"

"To give a red-haired rat the business," the boy said, "so you better get in there with your old lady." His hand came out of his pocket and there was a gun in it. "Or don't and see if I care." He licked lips too red, too moist, "I've always had a yen to pump lead into a dame."

Something horrible slurred his voice and peered from his wide blue eyes. It was this that gave Mary strength enough to fumble open the door beside her, stumble into Katherine Noll's room and slam the door shut again behind her.

CHAPTER VIII

IN SPITE of what he'd told Flasher, Hugh Mordred did not go straight to the house on Vermeer Street from the Sheridan Street subway station. He made a detour to a certain malodorous flat on Grove Street where in a furtive,

darkness-screened transaction he replenished his supply of the glistening white crystals for which John Scanlon would be avid, tomorrow morning. This delayed him just long enough that when he resumed his homeward progress Tom Carrol was coming down the El steps at Christopher Street two blocks the other side of Vermeer Street.

And at that same moment Katherine Noll, startled out of the exhausted sleep into which she'd just fallen, clicked on her bed lamp and gaped at Mary Carrol, flattened against the door's dark wood, her mouth open in a voiceless scream.

"What is it, child?"

The girl's ashen lips worked, forming words that would not come—that came at last in a husk that was neither whisper nor voice. "Men out there. Duke Martin's men, waiting to kill Tom."

"Here!" the older woman exclaimed, and then her eyes went bleak. "It can't be Tom they're after. Martin has nothing against him."

"Yes he has. Don't you remem— That's right. You were upstairs. Tom knocked him down the day we took the room here, because he tried to mash me."

"Tom knocked—That's how Martin knew what you look like. And that's what he meant when he said he knew why—" The old woman's hand went to the flannel collar of her nightgown. "I told Martin he had red hair and he said he knew—"

"You told—"

"We must warn him." Mrs. Noll threw her covers back, was out of bed. "The phone—"

"Is cut and that horrible creature is in the hall. There's no way—"

"Yes there is." The other turned, was darting to the window. "Come here. Tom has to come through Grove Street whether he walks from work or takes the El and you can get to it

through the backyards—" She leaned out, was tugging at the last length of the iron ladder, raised out of reach of prowlers. "Down this firescape and through the holes in the fences." The ladder scraped down and thudded on the pavement below. "Hurry!"

"HURRY," John Scanlon whispered to himself. The slam of a door downstairs had broken his paralysis, had sent him across the hall to this window at its rear. "Got to hurry." Iron scraped on iron, far down, and something thudded. So what? *She* wasn't down there. She was coming up the stairs behind him and she mustn't find him here.

Don't turn. *Don't turn!* If you see her, you're lost. Just put your hand on the sill, your left hand because you've got the knife in your right. Reach your leg over, feel for the rung—The iron hurts. You've forgotten your shoes. Never mind that. Turn, get the other leg out, start down.

She can come to your room now, you aren't there. You've fooled her—the chuckle died in his throat.

Looking down to find the next rung he saw a pale shape down there in the moonlight, a graceful slim shape that came off the end of the ladder and started across the yard. He hadn't fooled her at all. She'd been waiting down there for him and now she was running to call Them.

But why doesn't she laugh? Laugh, damn you! Why don't you call Them with your laugh, tinkling and silvery in the silver moonlight? You'd better laugh now, my sweet, instead of sneaking through that hole in the fence. You won't have much longer to laugh because it's *me* that's after *you* now, me that's sliding down, swooping down like a bat on silent wings. It's me flitting across the yard to the hole through

which you've just sneaked. Laugh now, my pretty, because before you get through the next hole or the next I'll catch you and you'll never laugh again.

And then I'll be safe from Them at last, because even you can't laugh with a red gash in your white throat.

The clock in Jefferson Market Tower struck the quarter hour.

Tom Carrol, striding along Hudson Street, heard the clock strike. He grinned. The corner of Grove Street was just ahead, a short block on that and he'd be turning the sharp angle it makes with Vermeer Street and be home. He hoped Mary was awake so he could tell her how sorry he was about last night. Maybe he shouldn't. He was sorry but saying so wouldn't change its having happened.

Katherine Noll heard the ancient clock strike, her hand on the key she'd turned in the hall door, waiting, listening, for the dull thud of guns in the street. She hadn't meant to harm Mary and Tom. She'd meant to save their happiness. But she couldn't go back and undo it now. Things done can never be undone.

The clock's deep bong came to Hugh Mordred trudging wearily along Grove Street, a moonlit gut empty of life except for, a policeman sneaking a smoke in a doorway. Mordred too was thinking of Mary, how she'd been when he'd first seen her, childlike in newfound happiness, sweetly naive. His sardonic lips twitched. Could it be that he was experiencing what is called a 'twinge of conscience'? Too late for that now. He couldn't change Mary back to what she'd been when she came to the house on Vermeer Street. Nor himself.

Old Omar's most quoted quatrain trailed across his mind:

The moving finger writes and having writ

Moves on; nor all thy piety nor wit

*Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.*

THE clock struck just as Mary squeezed through the last fence hole and saw ahead the alley whose mouth opened on Grove Street. The sound died away and she heard another sound behind her. Twisting as she ran, she saw a black shape squeeze through that hole, saw in the moonlight the same pallid and terrible face that had hung in the darkness at the head of the stairs while Mrs. Noll wrote the receipt for their first month's rent.

A scream formed in her throat but would not out. She was in the alley. Behind her was the pad of swift following feet and ahead, in the street, the click of heels—Tom?—but behind her, terribly close, a husky voice, "Laugh, damn you. Why don't you laugh?"

A yard more. Half a yard and she'd be out—Bony fingers caught her shoulder, slipped off but they had flung her against harsh brick. Lamplight stroked red hair passing the alley mouth but the fingers had Mary's shoulder again and sank in, pinned her against the wall.

"Tom!"

The cry only in her clamped throat, soundless. The face rung before her, tiny light-worms wriggling in its mad eyes. A long blade glinted lifting to strike. "Bend your head back," panted in her ears. "Stretch your white throat, beautiful and damned."

And Tom's footsteps were fading as he walked on into Duke Martin's trap. The scream came. "Tom! Don't——!" was muffled by a harsh palm whose thumb hooked under Mary's chin and forced it up to stretch her throat. Laugh now. Why don't you laugh?"

The knife slashed—A fist cracked on flesh and the hand was torn from her mouth. Mary was free, was clinging with rasped hands to the bricks as she

watched black shapes scuffling here by her, only the knife visible above that dark snarling struggle, the knife and the hand that clutched it and the other hand that clutched the knife-hand's wrist.

Somewhere there was a piercing whistle and a thud of running feet but Mary saw the knife-hand tear loose, strike down. The black mass split apart and the one that fell had red hair in the moonlight. The other twisted to her, snarling, "Now you." Sudden light was bright on the scarlet, dripping blade—Flat gun sound pounded and the knife clattered down and the gun pounded again.

The madman sagged, was a crumpled heap at her feet sprawled lifeless in the beam of the policeman's torch. The beam flitted up to dazzle her eyes and the cop grunted but another voice exclaimed, "My God. It's Mary!" It was Tom's voice and Tom was coming into the alley mouth, but how could that be? Tom was lying here sprawled on the concrete—"Mary, darling." Tom's arms, strong and tender, crushed Mary to the dear harshness of his coat and the night weltered into her brain.

Mary was still cradled in Tom's arms as she came up out of the darkness to the sound of many shifting feet, of many hoarse voices. Policemen crowded the alley, their flashlights dancing and in those flitting lights she saw that one cop knelt by a sprawled form. She saw, under hair a tawnier red than Tom's the gray and pain-twisted countenance of Hugh Mordred.

"Just got him in the side, Sarge," the policeman grunted. "He'll be all right after a couple weeks in the hospital. "But look at this what spilled out of his pocket. Ten decks of snow, folded nice and neat. If he ain't a peddler, you can shove my nightstick down my gullet."

Mary Carrol didn't understand that and she didn't care much. Her Tom

was safe with all these cops around, and she was safe in Tom's arms.

EPILOGUE

"THEY couldn't prove the peddling charge, of course," the whiskey-sodden voice husked. "But they gave me six months on the Island for illegal possession of narcotics. Only six months, but that was enough. I never wrote another line."

I took my cigar from my mouth. It had gone out long ago and I'd forgotten to relight it, but I'd chewed it to shreds. "Why not, Mordred? Surely there must have been human material enough there for a hundred plays."

"Yes." The shadow of what might once have been a sardonic smile touched the cracked lips. "But I might have been tempted once more to create situations for that human material to react to, and—" He broke off. "I did go back to Vermeer Street to find out how Mary—how Tom were getting along. They'd moved out of that damned house and I knew they'd be all right, once they were free of it."

"Once they were free of *you*," I corrected him. "It wasn't the house that was the evil that almost ruined their happiness. It was you."

"Of course. But it wasn't till I moved into that house that I became—what I was. And how about Mrs. Noll?"

"How about her? What was her secret?"

Hugh Mordred looked me straight in the face for the first time since we'd come into the lunchroom together. "I don't know. The papers I found in her attic were so mildewed that I could not read a single word."

"Oh, come now. How did you know enough to threaten her with them if you couldn't read them?"

"I didn't have to read them, Mr. Hal-

lam. It was enough for me to know that she lived in that house where something evil dwells, something beyond our understanding, of which that odd stain on the wall is a sign and a warning."

"Nonsense," I snorted. "That's sheer, impossible nonsense."

"The nightmare of an alcohol-addled brain." The derelict nodded. "Quite probably. But tell me if you can why it is impossible to erase that mark from its wall, the Mark of Cain."

And I couldn't answer him.

THE END

THE BLACK TEMPLE

By
H. B. HICKEY

(Concluded from page 93)

tion had achieved similar results."

I interrupted Finer. "Why didn't I think of that? Now I realize why he had to let his neighbors know what he was doing in the temple. He was the one who suggested that he was drawing the life from the children!"

Finer laughed. "Go to the head of the class. It was a cinch, really. You've heard of the gag where everybody in an office tells one of the men that he doesn't look well. He may be feeling fine when they start but if they act like they mean it they'll convince him. By the end of the day he's green, and he goes home.

"What I wanted, though, were cases of mass effects! They're easier to find than you would think. In England a couple of hundred years ago they had to close every cotton mill in the country because the women workers believed that there was something in the cotton that made them ill. And they were ill! By the thousands they became sick, had convulsions, and some even died!

"To take a closer instance: in a small Illinois community not long ago the belief spread that a man in a black mask was entering homes at night and spraying people with a poison gas. People woke up with their throats burning, their eyes tearing, and a nauseous odor in the air. Many swore they saw the man in the mask! Of course there was no man and the odor came from the summer flowers they all had in their

gardens. You can look that one up in any newspaper's files.

"Well, once the parents became convinced that their children were being subjected to evil forces they did a natural thing. They kept the kids in the house! Now you lock a kid up in a dark house and don't let him go out to play and you can bet he'll get pale and scrawny! Add to that the effect of constant fear implanted in him by his parents and you turn him into a bundle of nerves who can't even eat properly. If this had lasted much longer those kids would have begun to die off!"

For a moment after Finer finished there was silence in the room. Ellen's face was blanched with a look of horror.

"And I was going to help him!" she cried tearfully. "I was going to defend him against those poor people!"

I stopped her. "Well, he got what was coming to him."

Finer nodded. "He created the thing that destroyed him. There's a moral there, maybe. You can push the people only so far. He forgot the fact that in the final analysis their love for their children would overcome their fear of him and his temple."

He got up and started for the door. "Speaking of love," he said, "it's a great healer too." He shut the door behind him."

Ellen came and sat on the edge of the bed.

... And Carry One

by William P. McGivern

A man who deals with accounting figures all his life will do things methodically — in a definite pattern. But death has no pattern

WILLIAM ARMSTEAD was chief of the accounting department for an insurance company whose agencies and salesmen stretched across the country. The job paid twenty-two thousand dollars a year and was one for which Armstead was well qualified.

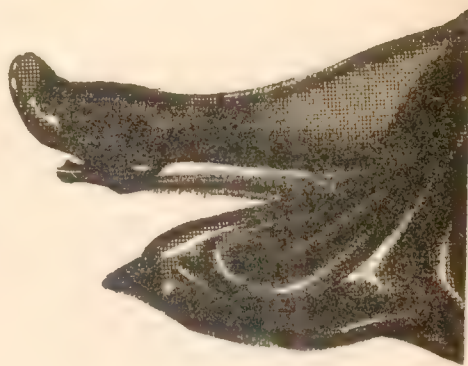
His twin gods were method and order. The company to his thinking was a vast cathedral of figures, charts, analyses and reports, which he had designed and built with the religious zeal of a medieval architect.

This feeling for order and system had dominated his entire life. As a young man he made a note of the hours of sleep he had each night; another ledger contained an inventory, complete with cost and depreciation figures, of every item he owed; still another enumerated the qualities, ages, descriptions and opinions of the young women of his acquaintance.

When he married he was thirty-five, the age he had decided on in his first year of college. He married a girl of good family, ten years his junior, but whose chief attraction to him was a temperament plastic enough to be molded to his design.

Now he sat in his spare, efficient office and there was furrow of concentration across his forehead. From his upper left vest pocket he took a neatly sharpened pencil and wrote his wife's name on a scratch pad.

This was one of his few habits. When





He stared down at her body with a fascinated shock and horror. He couldn't believe it . . .

he was worried about a problem he would unconsciously write a word or two with which the problem was associated in his mind. These notations frequently appeared meaningless but his secretary who knew him quite well, prided herself on being able to decipher them. Thus if she found the word annual on his scratch pad she might guess that Mr. Armstead was preparing to re-examine the company's rates on annuities, or perhaps to make a report on the cost per policy of collecting premiums on a quarterly, instead of a yearly basis.

Now Armstead wrote the single word Evelyn, which was his wife's name. As he knew everything about himself, so he knew everything about his wife. She was five feet four inches tall, weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds, was thirty-five years old. She had brown hair, gray eyes and wore a size five-and-a-half shoe.

He knew the things she liked and didn't like. He was also aware of the things she feared. One of the things she feared was her husband. He knew this quite well. Occasionally he had experimented with her fear of him, not from any sadistic impulse, but simply as a fact to study and classify according to degree and type.

He knew another fact about his wife and it was this fact that impelled him to write her name unconsciously but neatly on his scratch pad. She was having an affair with a young doctor, named Graham, whom they had called in for something or other when their regular doctor had been out of town.

There was no emotional reaction on his part to this fact about his wife. He didn't love his wife, since he was incapable of loving anyone, but she was a part of his ordered existence, a part which he had carefully selected and shaped until it fitted smoothly into the structure of his life. He didn't want

that part of his life changed; nor did he want it removed, anymore than he would want a digit removed from a balanced column of figures.

He considered the fact of her unfaithfulness objectively. This affair with Dr. Graham had been going on for several months. Perhaps she loved him, perhaps not. The important thing was that the affair be broken up and that Evelyn should continue to function normally in his well-ordered life. Also it would be necessary to terminate the affair with Dr. Graham in a way that would preclude a recurrence of this sort of thing with anyone else.

Finally he put the pencil back in his pocket and got his secretary. "Please make an appointment for me at twelve-thirty today with Dr. Graham," he said.

DR. GRAHAM met him in the small reception room he shared with three other doctors. They shook hands and went into Dr. Graham's private office. Armstead seated himself in a chair beside the doctor's desk.

Dr. Graham sat on the edge of the desk. He was thirty-six years old, but he looked younger. He had features too regular to be interesting, but his eyes were good and his smile was boyish and natural.

"Don't tell me you're sick," he said.

"You've been having an affair with my wife," Armstead said. "I think we should talk it over."

Dr. Graham's smile went lop-sided and his face got redder. He started to fumble in his pockets for cigarettes and he stood up, then sat down again on the edge of the desk.

"I didn't mean to rattle you," Armstead said, "but I think we should talk it over, don't you?"

"The damn thing just happened," Dr. Graham said, speaking so rapidly that the words blurred together. "I don't

know what got into me. I know you think I'm a heel." He found his cigarettes and got one in his mouth. "And you're right," he said.

"That's rather irrelevant now," Armstead said. "Are you in love with my wife? Do you plan to marry her?"

"Have you talked to her?"

"No, I decided to see you first. Do you have any plans?"

"Look," Dr. Graham said. "I know what you must be thinking of me and you're right. But I went into this blind. We never talked about love or anything else." He waved his hand about to indicate the small office. "I'm not making any money here. It's a long grind to get yourself established as a doctor. I lost three good years in the army and that set me back that much more. How the devil could I make any plans?"

"I see," Armstead said.

The fact that Graham obviously didn't love his wife gave him a feeling of satisfaction. Had Graham loved her it might have caused difficulty. That wasn't the case. Graham had taken what was available, but he wouldn't go any farther unless he was pushed.

"I want to do what's right," Graham said, without much conviction. "I feel like an awful heel, you know."

"I love my wife," Armstead said. "Since you don't have any intention of marrying her I think you should stop seeing her. Do you agree?"

"Yes, you're right," Dr. Graham said quickly. His relief that he was getting out from under was obvious.

"Will you promise me you won't see her again?"

"Yes, I'll promise. It's swell of you to take it this way. I know I've been an awful heel."

"I'll say goodbye then, Doctor."

ARMSTEAD worked that afternoon with his usual relish. When he left

his office at five-fifteen sharp he was in an excellent humor. He smiled and said goodbye to his secretary and then walked across town to the station where he caught his local. On the twenty-minute ride he went through the paper with his customary thoroughness.

When he reached his home he gave his coat and hat to the maid and told her to ask Mrs. Armstead to come down to the library.

She came into the room a little later and he said, "Please sit down, Evelyn, I want to talk to you."

"I've got to look at the dinner in a minute," she said.

"This won't take long," he said, smiling.

She sat down in a chair facing him, a pretty woman with good skin and well-kept hands. She looked at him and then began twisting her wedding ring nervously. This was a habit of hers he understood and, in a sense, enjoyed. Several years before he had insisted she quit smoking. She had stopped smoking in front of him but he knew she sneaked cigarettes in her bathroom, especially after dinner. This knowledge gave him a secret amusement and he occasionally detained her after dinner with long pointless stories, simply to see if she would ever have the courage to interrupt him and leave. She never had but she had gotten into the habit of twisting her ring when she was under a strain which a cigarette might relieve.

"I saw Dr. Graham today," he said. "We had a talk about the affair you two have been carrying on. Now I think you and I should discuss it."

He watched her and it seemed that the words hit her with physical force. Her head jerked around to him and he saw her body stiffen. She stared at him for a long time, her face whitening, and then she turned away from him

and said in a low voice, "Why did you go to him? Why didn't you come to me?"

"Oh?" He raised his eyebrows. "Is there a protocol about such things? Sorry, I didn't know."

"What did he say?"

"We'll come to that in a minute. First, I want you to be ready to leave for the lodge tomorrow morning. Will that be enough time for you to get packed?"

"I'm not going," she said.

"Yes, you are, my dear. You are going to the lodge and you will remain there until I feel you can act like a sensible person, instead of a silly school girl."

"Why did you go to him? What did he say?" she asked again, and he noticed that she was twisting the ring frantically.

"He was quite embarrassed. He was pretty shocked when I asked him if he intended to marry you. He couldn't see that at all."

She looked back at him with something like fascination as he paused and smiled.

"I asked him to stop seeing you," he went on. "As a matter of fact I offered him five thousand dollars if he'd stop seeing you. He didn't want to take it, but I insisted."

"You're lying," she said.

"You know I never lie, my dear."

That was literally true. He never lied and his wife knew that only too well. The lie he told now didn't bother him. He felt that in this one circumstance it was justifiable.

HIS wife got to her feet and left the room quickly. A second later he heard her voice, high and uncontrolled, on the hall phone. He settled comfortably in his chair with the pleasant feeling of having put the facts of a problem

in the proper order and having gotten the proper result.

Evelyn was calling Dr. Graham now. He knew what would result from that conversation. She wouldn't mention the lie about the five thousand dollars out of pride; Graham's relief at being out of a bad situation, plus his middle-class embarrassment at appearing in an unheroic position would give his attitude the right touch of coldness and strain. She would talk to him hysterically and he would say the wrong things and then she would put the receiver down and go up to her room.

She would not come down for dinner.

He heard the phone being replaced and then the sound of her footsteps going up the stairs. He went to the sideboard and mixed himself a rare, before-dinner whisky and soda. Then he sat down, smiling.

He was still smiling when the shot sounded.

He put the drink down and got to his feet. For a second he stood still, then he ran across the library and up the stairs. He went down the corridor and into her room and then he stopped. For a long minute that seemed out of time he stood and looked down at the body of his wife.

She was lying on the floor beside her bed holding his revolver in her right hand. There was a great deal of blood.

He knelt beside her and felt her wrist for a pulse beat. There was none. He took the revolver from her hand and stood up slowly.

When he heard footsteps behind him he turned and saw the maid in the doorway, an expression of horror on her face.

"Don't lose your head," he said. "There is nothing that can be done. Please call the police."

The maid opened her mouth foolishly once or twice, then hurried away.

He stood there beside her a while longer; then he turned away and walked slowly down the stairs to the library. He sat down again in his chair and the house seemed strangely cold and empty.

He sat there for what seemed a long time and then, unconsciously, he took a neatly sharpened pencil from his upper left breast pocket.

There was a newspaper on the table beside his chair. Staring into the cold fireplace he wrote, *I killed her*, in his precise script on the paper.

This was a fact of which he was quite aware, and he was able to consider it without remorse. He hadn't thought she would commit suicide, but now that she had, he considered her action without emotion.

He thought he should like to go away for a while. That would be expected of him. Then when he returned he would get a competent housekeeper to take care of his home . . .

WHEN the police arrived they were quite sympathetic. They made a routine investigation and then they questioned the maid.

She told them that Armstead and his wife had had an argument about a man with whom Mrs. Armstead had been having an affair. She told them of hearing the shot and hurrying to Mrs. Armstead's room. When she testified that Mr. Armstead was standing

over his wife's body with a gun in his hand, the police became very interested.

They talked to Mr. Armstead at length and much of their sympathy had disappeared.

Finally a uniformed policeman found the paper on which Armstead had scribbled the words, *I killed her*.

They decided that was sufficient evidence to warrant their arresting Mr. Armstead on suspicion of murder . . .

THE newspapers made quite a story out of the case. Even more remarkable than the facts of the murder was the defendant's refusal to testify in his own behalf. There was much editorial speculation about this curious circumstance.

When the jury found him guilty of first degree murder he instructed his attorneys not to file an appeal.

Mr. Armstead knew with certainty that he was going to die. This was a fact and as such it had no emotional overtones for him. He considered it objectively. The facts had been put together in such a way that only one result was possible—as the death of his wife had been the inevitable result of another arrangement of facts.

For that reason he knew he was going to die.

Two months later, in the State gas chamber, Mr. Armstead proved as usual that he was right.

THE END

YOUR DICE

POPULAR notions about the history of gambling in America usually pin the credit (or blame, of originating the game of "craps" upon the early Southern Negroes. The game, in reality, was introduced by a French aristocrat, Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mande-ville who had seen the little dice roll in France, where the gentle art was known as "Hazards."

The name "craps" was taken from a nickname of the Creoles—"Johnny Crapaud"—the abbreviated form, most likely, being adopted in the heat and excitement of a session with the "bones" in

some New Orleans alley.

Strangely enough, Marigny, the enterprising originator of the sport, did not fare so well with Lady Luck. In fact, he lost a fortune playing the game. He owned considerable property and was obliged to cut a street through his property, and sell lots on both sides to obtain funds with which to pay his debts. Even today some maps of New Orleans show this street to have been named "Craps Street." The name was later changed to "Burgundy Street." —Robert Fordney.

MORE DEATHS THAN ONE

By

BRUNO FISCHER

(Continued from page 70)

CHAPTER XIII

Rachel Townsend

*Sunday, May 18
1:47 P.M.*

THERE was a shortcut through the patch of woods which lay between the highway and my cottage. The path brought you out so close to the living room windows that you couldn't help looking through them as you passed, especially since I'd taken down the curtains for belated spring cleaning.

Through the window I saw Dave Reese sitting on the couch. His elbows were on his knees, his head bowed, a cigarette limp in the corner of his mouth.

For once my heart didn't bound at the sight of him. If Dave visited me, it had something to do with business. It always did, even on Sundays. And today I was fed up with men. I was fed up with a brother who was letting an illusion destroy him, with a detective who had friendly brown eyes and was as insidious as a devil, with the man I loved but to whom I was little more than an animate part of his office equipment.

I strode into the house and slammed my handbag down on the table. "What's the job this time? Do I try to sell a house for you while you keep a date with your girl friend?"

Only Dave's head lifted. The rest of him remained inertly bowed on the couch. Not even the cigarette stirred in his mouth. His eyes were hollow, his cheeks taut, his mouth slack.

"Dave, you're sick!"

He spoke without taking the cigarette from his mouth, without any of him but his lips moving. "Just tired. I drove half the night and then walked the rest of the night. Not going anywhere in particular. A little while ago I went home, but I couldn't stand being alone, so I came here."

There was so little of his cigarette left that in another moment it would burn his lips, and likely as not in his present state

he wouldn't feel it. I plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and crushed it out in an ashtray.

"I'll lay ten to one it concerns Beverly."

Dully he looked at me. "I saw Frank kiss her."

Sensational discovery! Somebody beside himself kissed the succulent blonde.

"What did you think Frankie and Beverly did when they were together, read Elizabeth Barrett Browning to each other?"

"You don't understand." He was being very patient with me who had never loved and wouldn't know about such things. "She promised to marry me. It was all settled except the date. Then last night she was kissing Frank in the grape arbor."

"A grape arbor is a conventional place for kissing."

I WAS hurting him. What did he expect, for you to provide a nice soft couch for him to weep on because he was getting a very small share of what he'd given you for so long? He had never encouraged you to weep on *his* shoulder.

He stood up. "Why bother you with my grief?" He was huffy now. Men get like that when women don't supply them with a large enough dose of soothing syrup.

I grabbed his arm with both hands and swung around him and tried to pull him down on the couch. "Don't be a dope. You came here because I'm the only real friend you've got."

He grinned—a poor, weak imitation of the grins I had known. "That's right, Rachel, my only real friend." And he submitted to my pressure and sat down beside me.

His head touched my shoulder and stayed there. It meant nothing. It was a gesture of weariness by a man physically and emotionally exhausted, and my shoulder was more convenient than a pillow. My arm went around him, and when he relaxed against me, I felt all mushy inside. It was nothing to him, but so very much to me.

Then came the confessional. A woman could keep a thing like that locked up inside her forever, but a man had to talk it

out. Tell me, darling. Sit here closer than you have ever been to me and pour out your woe.

He spoke slowly, thoughtfully, as if looking at all of it again in order to make up his mind that it had really happened. It wasn't much. He had had a date with Beverly last night and had found her kissing Frankie in the arbor. Kissing him passionately; that he was sure of. And saying passionate words to Frankie, though he couldn't recall what they were.

I remembered that that other man was my brother. Two angles of that particular triangle touched me personally. "What did Frankie do?"

"It was a mess. She ran after me. She wanted me back. Half the town saw it."

"And Frankie?"

"He ran after her while she ran after me. She wouldn't let him come near her. The last I saw of him he was walking away."

Prowling out the night like Dave. That was why he hadn't come home. She had kissed Frankie, but it was Dave she had run after. She was a marvel. Other women broke one heart at a time, but she could break two at a clip.

I stroked his hair. He sighed and snuggled closer to me, like a small boy being comforted by his mother.

"You're a swell kid, Rachel."

I COULD have torn his hair out. You were a swell kid in the office when you turned a profitable real estate deal for him or did little things for his personal comfort. You were a swell kid now because with you there were none of the tensions and restraints and suspicions he'd felt with the man-collecting blonde he'd fallen for.

I didn't tear his hair out. I kept stroking it.

"A kiss isn't so much." Dave said it suddenly, not speaking to me, but to my shoulder. "Even when you're married such things happen, and intelligent people forgive and forget. But when a girl like Beverly kisses somebody—a girl as—as—"

"As pure as the driven snow?"

"That's about it, even when put with the notorious Townsend sarcasm. When Beverly kisses a man, she means it. I've had all night and morning to think about it. The only answer is that she loves Frank and doesn't love me. That's all right if that's the way she feels, but it

hurts like hell."

She wasn't out of his blood, and there wasn't anything you could do about it if holding him in your arms wasn't enough. You couldn't give him what he called the notorious Townsend sarcasm, saying: What of all the other kisses she's given all the other men—and not only kisses? He wouldn't believe you. He'd flare up in rage because you'd sullied her fair name, and you'd lose him for good, if you could lose what you didn't have.

So you had to be content with what little of him was for you and hold him close and stroke his hair.

I didn't know how many seconds or minutes or hours had passed when I heard a sharp intake of breath. I raised my eyes, and above Dave's disheveled hair I saw Frankie's head and shoulders framed by the open, uncurtained window. He must have come up by way of the path through the woods. A moment after I saw him he was gone.

I pulled my arm away from about Dave. "Frankie is coming."

Dave sat up. There wasn't any reason why we should act as if we had been caught red-handed. But Dave was on his feet and I was smoothing out my skirt when Frankie entered the room.

Frankie's strong face had become flabby and his eyes were feverish. One night without sleep shouldn't have made him look like that. As he came into the room, you could feel his rage like a physical force.

"Hello, Frank." Dave was calm and deliberate. He held a pack of cigarettes in his hand. "I want to talk with you."

"Yeah?" Frankie took a couple of more steps into the room and then balanced himself on the balls of his feet. "Isn't Beverly enough for you? Do you have to have every decent girl in town?"

"It was my impression last night that Beverly was yours." Bitterness touched Dave's voice.

"You keep your dirty hands off my sister!" The stubborn, unreasoning, violent mood was on Frankie.

A spot of red appeared on the paleness of Dave's cheek. He had an anger to match Frankie's. "How'd you like to go to hell?"

Frankie swung at him.

BY THE time I reached them, each had struck at least one blow. Now Dave

was clinging to Frankie's arms, trying to keep those terrible fists away. I could not tear them apart, and my voice, shrill and discordant, scolded them as you would scold uncontrollable children. I doubted that they knew I was there.

Suddenly Frankie twisted, wrenching away from Dave's grip, and as he did so, his hard body struck mine. I was hurled against the table. Breath was knocked out of me. Numb with despair, I sagged there, watching Dave retreat before Frankie's onslaught. A chair crashed over and then the floorlamp. Frankie leaned forward, and Dave dropped down to one knee.

Dave shook his head and grinned, and blood on his mouth made that grin a grotesque thing. His breathing was like the sound of a rusty engine. Frankie stood over him with his fists ready and a kind of madness in his face.

"Stop it!" I screamed at them. "Oh, you idiots, stop it!"

Dave shook his head again and leaped up at Frankie.

What I did was as stupid as the fight, but I couldn't just stand there impotently. I hurled myself between them. Frankie's fist was already on its way, and my face came into its path. Nausea flowed all the way down to my legs. The room wavered and started to rise. Then it came to rest and I found that I was sitting on the floor.

There was a stunned silence. Frankie gaped down at me, blinking foolishly. Dave's hands were to his bleeding mouth. At any rate, I'd stopped the fight.

I started to rise. The nausea was settling in my stomach; I thought I could hold it down. When I was on my feet, I wobbled.

Dave put an arm about me. "Your face! Does it hurt much?"

My face was numb. I touched my cheek. It didn't feel like skin, and as soon as I put my fingers on it it started to smart.

"Take your hands off her!" Frankie was at it again, or still at it, and his fists were clenched.

"Cut it out, Frankie," I told him wearily.

"Then let him take his hands off you."

The pressure of Dave's arm on my shoulders didn't loosen. He had his handkerchief in his free hand and was dabbing blood off his lips. He was still grinning, recklessly, angrily, tautly.

I took a step away from his arm. "You'd better go, Dave."

"Not if it means leaving you alone with him."

"He's my brother, Dave. Please go."

He looked for a clean spot on his bloody handkerchief and then nodded. "Sure, Rachel." He walked halfway to the door, remembered something and came back for his hat on the table. He put it on at a cocky angle. He spoke through the handkerchief against his mouth. "If you need me, Rachel, phone me."

Then Frankie and I were alone. He touched my arm.

"Gosh, Rachel, I didn't see you. I'd cut my hand off before I'd hit you."

I TURNED away without looking at him and went shakily into the bathroom. The mirror showed a raw, ugly bruise below my right cheekbone. Frankie must have struck me only a glancing blow; generally he did more damage with his fist.

I washed the bruise. That made it hurt more. I'd be disfigured for a week. What would I tell people—that I had fallen against the edge of the door? That explanation had become a stale joke, one followed by smirks and innuendoes. Well, it was a joke, wasn't it? Like two men beating each other for the same reason that a man in a prison cell pounds his fists against stone walls.

When I returned to the living room, Frankie was drinking whiskey out of the mouth of a bottle. He put the bottle down and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Why should you want to get drunk?" I said. "You must feel wonderful already. Twice as good as usual because this time you hit two people."

"Jees, I didn't mean it." He came over to me, and for one of the few times in my memory he was contrite. His eyes blinked as if about to shed tears. "Listen. 'There's nobody means more to me than you do.'"

It was probably true, perhaps even including Beverly, but I was too empty inside to care. I went to the cigarette humidor on the table. There was nothing in it but grains of tobacco in the corners.

He was again at my shoulder. "What kind of brother would I be if I let guys mess around with you?"

I laughed harshly. "You and Dave didn't fight over me. You fought over Beverly."

"That's something else. I wouldn't mind if Dave was on the level. But he's not."

Beverly is his girl. Listen—I know. Last night—”

He stopped. He didn't want to speak of how she had kissed him but run after Dave.

My handbag was on the table. I went to it for cigarettes. Frankie had the bottle again in his hand and held it tilted to his mouth.

“Why do you men bother with that tramp?” I burst out as I opened my handbag. “She's not good enough for any of you. She wasn't even good enough for Mike Parker.”

The bottom of the bottle struck the table with a thump. “Who you talking about?”

There was no point to it, but if I couldn't batter flesh with my fists, I had to find release in some way.

“When I mention a tramp, whom can I mean but Beverly Atwood?”

He lurched toward me. His face looked the way it had just before he had swung at Dave.

I stood where I was, looking at him. “Go on, hit me again. Get it out of your system by hitting me.”

He wilted. His head, shoulders, body drooped. “God, Rachel, I'd never want to hurt you!” His words were almost sobs. He stepped around me to the door.

I felt that I had to do something. I was the only one he had in the world. But I was too weary down to my bones and deeper to make more effort than was required to dig in my handbag for cigarettes.

My pack was empty. I let it fall from my fingers and started toward a window. Perhaps I intended to call Frankie back; my mind was blurred with defeat and exhaustion. My foot struck a small object on the floor. It was the pack of cigarettes Dave had been holding when the fight had started.

I picked up the pack and shook out a cigarette. When I had it lit, I didn't want it. I went into my room and fell on my bed.

CHAPTER XIV

Frank Townsend

*Sunday, May 18
10:32 P.M.*

HEADLIGHTS kept flashing by around the curve, but I was too far in from

the road for anybody to see me. That was good. Somebody would stop if they saw a man on his face just back of the road shoulder, thinking he was dead or hurt or something, and all they'd find would be Frank Townsend so cockeyed drunk he didn't know where he was or how he'd got there.

One thing nobody could say about me, that I was a soak, that I ever drank more than was good for me. Until today, that is!

God, how sick I was! It was worse than drunk sickness. It hurt every part of me.

Maybe because I hadn't eaten for so long. Yesterday at around five I made myself two cheese sandwiches at home and had a glass of milk. This morning I had coffee and two crullers at the Twin Elms lunch wagon. Then this afternoon I'd poured a couple of slugs of rye down my throat. Just two drinks. Pretty big ones, but the bottle was more than half empty to begin with, and there'd been plenty left when I'd put it down. Nothing after that—no food, no liquor, just walking the way I'd walked last night till I started to throw up.

How could one guy throw up so much, even after when there was no food or liquor or anything except my twisted guts left in me?

It was coming again. My knees jerked up against my belly. My body twisted into knots, and it hurt. It hurt so much I wanted to die.

Maybe I was dying.

Nuts! A guy like me didn't die because he poured whiskey into an empty stomach. They didn't come stronger than me.

Yeah, a powerful guy. So strong he could knock his sister right off her feet with one sock.

It wasn't my fault. I didn't see her. She was trying to keep me from taking Dave apart. Everything that guy wanted he got, even having my sister jump into my fist so he wouldn't get it in his own face. What did he want—the whole world? He had a good real estate business, and that made him somebody fathers and mothers wanted their daughters to marry. It made him somebody Beverly chased after even before she'd finished kissing me like her whole soul was in it. Did the heel need my sister as a side dish?

So I smacked him around and I'd do it again.

What the hell did he think I was?

IT WAS cold. I was shivering like I was wrapped in ice. The ground was damp. Maybe that was what was giving me cramps and making me sweat the same time I was freezing. The thing to do was get up and walk.

She'd meant that kiss. She loved me all right, the way she hung onto me and said, Honey, honey! I get it if I had a real estate business she wouldn't have chased after Dave. She was like all the rest of them, wanting a guy who could buy her a nice home and nice clothes.

Why don't you get up? You're not a baby, lying on the ground and shivering and twisting your body against the pain and waiting for your mother to come along and pick you up. Get up and go home.

I started to get up. After a long time I was on my hands and knees. I couldn't move another inch. What was the matter with me? I was supposed to be a strong guy, wasn't I? Get the bottoms of your feet solid on the ground. Now push up with your hands.

I fell flat on my face. I lay like that, shivering and retching.

You can't kid me, Beverly. You love me. You wouldn't kiss somebody the way you kissed me last night unless you loved him. It isn't right not to marry the man you love. I'll work my fingers off for you. Ask anybody, they'll tell you Frank Townsend is a decent, hard-working, sober man. Maybe I can't give you right off all the expensive things Dave Reese can, but I'll make you happy. I'll spend every minute of my life making you happy.

Come on, get on your feet and go home. You're sick. You have a fever. You didn't eat and sleep enough. Go home and Rachel will take care of you, like she always did when you needed her.

And maybe your sister needs you more than she ever needed anybody.

She didn't kill them. Who says she did? I'll beat hell out of anybody who ever says she could've killed anybody. All right, then why do you even think it? Who says I think it? All right, then why did you start thinking in the first place that she didn't do it?

Shut up, damn it!

That's the stuff, on your feet. It's so dark you can't see a thing, but the road is over there to your left. Now walk slowly. All you have to do is get to the road. A car will stop for you and take

you home. You're not drunk, you're sick, so you don't have to worry what people will think. Anybody can get sick.

You're a tough guy. A little sickness can't get you down. Just keep walking.

Where's the road? I've walked for so long and there's no road.

But I'm not walking. Oh, God, I never got on my feet. I'm lying here all twisted up and so cold I can't stand it.

Beverly, darling, sweetheart, lovely girl. You're so beautiful, so good and clean. Kiss me the way you did last night. Put your arms around me.

Ah, like that. You're so warm. You're so wonderful. And your mouth feels so . . .

CHAPTER XV

Kathryn Atwood

*Monday, May 19
3:20 P.M.*

THE bed jacket was rich yellow silk with lace beading at the neck and pushed-up, elbow-length sleeves, and through the beading black velvet ribbons were drawn.

"The rage of New York," read the sign on the bed jacket. \$12.95."

The wife of a school teacher seldom has extra money, but I could see Beverly's hair, more vividly yellow than the silk, cascade over the bed jacket when she rose in the morning. I would tell George that it had cost \$4.95, and tonight I could begin to make up the difference in my budget by serving spaghetti and tomato sauce instead of steak. I entered the store.

"Is it Beverly's birthday?" asked Mrs. Carrigan as she wrapped up the bed jacket.

"Does it require a special occasion for a mother to buy her daughter clothes?"

"Especially a lovely daughter like your's," commented Mrs. Carrigan. "Lovely things for the lovely."

The words of this shrewd and discerning business woman were their own answer. With the neatly wrapped package under my arm, I stepped out into the street.

Carrigan's was on the same block as David Reese's office. As I passed the office, I glanced through the broad window. At that moment David came out and brushed by so close to me that he might have knocked me down if I hadn't halted abruptly. Even then he did not appear

to see me.

"Good-afternoon, David," said I.

He looked back at me over his shoulder. "Hello, Mrs. Atwood," he mumbled and walked on without having paused for more than an instant. He had not even tipped his hat.

I was deeply shocked by his behavior. Possibly he had not yet recovered from his absurd quarrel with Beverly, but that was no excuse for him to forget his manners.

He strode around the back of his sedan at the curb, and it was then that I noticed that Rachel Townsend sat in the car. She stared directly ahead; she did not move her head when David got in beside her. He leaned close to her—somewhat intimately, it seemed to me—and spoke to her. Her face turned to him then. I saw him pat her shoulder.

I strolled on through the May afternoon.

BEVERLY was in the kitchen when I returned home. I saw her from the hall as I placed my hat in the closet. She wore the light-blue sweater I had knit for her last year and the Botany flannel skirt of identical shade and my red-and-white coverall apron. Her gorgeous hair was gathered up in a tight bun and the sleeves of her sweater were rolled up over dimpled elbows. She was pouring gingerbread mix out of a package into my crockery bowl.

Not even the kitchen advertisements in the women's magazines could show such a charming picture of domesticity.

I preferred to present the bed jacket to her when she was going to bed and could try it on immediately for me. I placed the package next to my hat on the closet shelf and went into the kitchen.

My daughter looked up at me with a glowing smile. "I'm practicing to make somebody a good wife."

When I was a girl, baking was an art. Nowadays one simply had to open packages.

"I saw David in town, dear," said I.

Beverly kept her eyes on the mixing bowl. "Did he have anything to say about—me?"

"He didn't seem to have time to give me a civil greeting. Apparently he was in too great a hurry to get into his car where that Rachel Townsend was waiting for him."

"Well, she works for him, Mother," said Beverly, ever eager to see the best in people.

"Was that the reason he stroked her shoulder?"

"Did he do that?"

"I distinctly saw him. When you marry David, you will have to make him discharge that girl. While I consider David a steady and reliable young man, I wouldn't trust any man alone all day with that Townsend girl, whose reputation, I hear, isn't all that it should be."

Beverly smiled rather wanly. "Those particular wedding bells are off, Mother."

"Nonsense. There are always meaningless little squabbles between young people." I was tired from the walk to and from town; I pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down. "Dear, I simply cannot understand why you permitted that unspeakable Frank Townsend to call on you in the garden Saturday night."

"I told you, Mother," she said, stirring the batter with a wooden spoon. "I had no idea he'd be out there when I went out to the garden. After all, would I make a date with him when I already had one with Dave?" She stabbed the spoon deep into the bowl. "Everything went wrong that night."

"David will come back to you. Just give him a few days."

"Do you think so, Mother?" said Beverly eagerly.

"He'll come back on bended knees. You'll see."

The front door closed. I glanced at the electric clock on the wall and was surprised to see that it was a quarter past four. George was a painfully precise man; a clock could be set by the time he returned home from teaching school. Today he was twenty-five minutes late.

He came directly into the kitchen. His hat was still on his head and his topcoat was neatly folded over one arm. This morning I had told him that the day was too warm for a topcoat, but George was ever the pessimist.

"Good-afternoon, dear," I greeted him.

He did not respond at once. I noticed how old he was looking. He had always looked older than his years, even when I had married him, but now I observed with a shock that he was rapidly becoming an old man, though his age was not greatly more than mine.

"Frank Townsend is dead," said George heavily.

SOMETHING fell. I turned my head a trifle and saw that Beverly had dropped the mixing spoon. Brown spats of batter splattered the floor.

"What—what happened to him, Daddy?"

"It's still uncertain," said George. "Stark and Helm came by in a car as I was walking home from school. They stopped to tell me. It appears that early this morning tourists parked their car on Route 37 to stretch their legs. They found the body a short distance off the road."

Beverly's fingers fumbled at her strand of small pearls. Her lips quivered. "Maybe he was hit by a car."

"Helm told me that there is absolutely no sign of violence on the body. All that has been ascertained so far is that he has been dead for a considerable time."

"Then he wasn't—wasn't—" Beverly took a deep breath and shivered.

"Murdered?" George's mouth had that twist to it that I so disliked.

It seemed to me that a chill swept through the kitchen, as if a door had suddenly been opened on a freezing day.

"Dear, you're upsetting the child," said I sternly.

"I'm sorry," said George slowly. "It is possible that he took sick and collapsed and died where he fell."

Beverly drew in her breath. It sounded like the briefest of sobs. Then without another word she left the kitchen. George stepped aside to let her pass. I heard her go up the stairs and then I heard her room door close.

I leaned over from my chair and picked up the mixing spoon she had dropped. The chill had not left with Beverly's departure. It was, I realized, inside me.

"That was cruel, dear," I told George. "You had no right to shock the child."

"She would have learned soon enough from other sources that he was dead."

I fetched a rag from the sink and wiped the batter from the floor.

George stood over me with his hat on his head and his topcoat over his arm and his thin face older than I had ever known it. "Go up to her, Kathryn. She needs you."

"Nonsense." I wiped my hands on a dish towel. "It's not as if anybody who

mean anything to her died."

George's tone sharpened. "If I were her friend instead of only her father, I would go up to her. She needs you this minute, Kathryn."

"Very well."

As I ascended the stairs, I remembered the gift I had bought for her in Carrigan's. How fortunate now that I had given way to that impulse. I returned to the package and carried it upstairs with me.

IN HER room, Beverly lay face down her bed. She did not stir when I closed the door behind me.

I stood at the side of the bed. "Dear, it can't be that a coarse creature like that meant so much to you."

She turned her left cheek to the pillow and looked up at me. Her eyes were dry, although sad. "After all, Mother, he was somebody I had known for years."

When Beverly had been twelve years of age, our cocker spaniel had died of old age, and for days she had been inconsolable. Two years ago, when my brother Alfred had succumbed to cancer, she had wept, although she had hardly known him. My daughter was as tender-hearted as she was sweet-natured.

"Dear, here is something I bought for you this afternoon," said I.

Beverly sat up. "For me?" She ripped open the package. Thrusting tissue paper aside, she pulled out the bed jacket. "Why, Mother, it's gorgeous!"

The gift was like a tonic to her. She jumped off the bed and removed the cover-all apron and put on the bed jacket over her sweater. A thirty-six fitted her perfectly. As she tied the black ribbon at the neck, she surveyed herself in the dresser mirror.

"How does it look, Mother?"

"As adorable on you as I knew it would have to look."

She threw her arms about me. "Oh, Mother, you're so good to me."

Then she turned back to the mirror, and in the glass I saw the glow return to her eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

David Reese

Monday, May 19
7:10 P.M.

A FEW minutes after the sleuth and the sheriff left me I drove to Rachel Townsend's house. My guess was right. Stark's car was parked outside.

When I reached the front door, I heard Helm, in the house, ask Rachel where she'd got the bruise on her cheek. He sounded merely solicitous. A pretty smart cookie.

She said: "Last night I stumbled against a door in the dark."

You shouldn't lie to cops about matters that can be easily checked. Twenty minutes ago I'd given Ben Helm straight stories about the mess Saturday evening outside Beverly's house and about the fight I'd had with Frank next day. It wasn't good, but better than if I'd held anything back and he'd learned the facts from other sources.

Now here he was matching up my story with whatever Rachel would tell him, and she was playing it all wrong. I barged into the house.

Rachel sat on the edge of a chair, her hands twisting the handkerchief she'd held most of the afternoon since word had come to the office that Frank was dead. She hadn't used it, hadn't shed a tear, not even when we'd viewed her brother's body in the funeral parlor. And she was dry-eyed now, though the handkerchief was still out. A symbol of the grief she was holding inside her.

"Tell him about the fight," I said. "I've nothing to hide."

Stark yelled, "Hey, you!" and at once subdued as Ben Helm turned to me.

The sleuth wasn't pleased at the fact that I'd appeared. "Anything you want, Mr. Reese?"

"I'm her lawyer. It's my right to be present when you question her."

"My impression is that you're in the real estate business."

"That's how I make my living," I said, "but I'm a lawyer. Go on, Rachel, tell them how Frank hit you by accident when he swung at me."

Eyes, looking up at me, were empty. The handkerchief rose to her face, but only as high as her mouth. Dully she said through the handkerchief: "If you know, why ask me?"

"We got reasons," Stark informed her profoundly. He jabbed a bony finger at Rachel. "And you got reasons for lying about that sore on your cheek. You was

trying to protect somebody." And he made sure there was no doubt whom he meant by giving me a hard look.

Helm didn't care for the sleuth's bluntness. His own assaults were from the flank. He grimaced and fished out his pipe.

Rachel said thinly: "Protect?" The handkerchief came away from her mouth. "Mr. Helm, how did Frankie die?"

"We're not yet sure."

"Then why are you asking these questions. As if . . ." Her eyes widened darkly. "Frankie didn't just drop dead."

"Probably not," the sleuth agreed and let it go at that. Hardly a communicative lad. "I'm waiting for you to tell me what happened Sunday afternoon."

She looked at me. I nodded.

PATHETICALLY she said: "I came straight home when I left you. Dave was here. We were sitting together on the couch and Frankie saw us through the window and got the—the wrong impression. He came into the house and started to fight with Dave. Frankie punched me by accident, and that stopped the fight. He was very contrite. Dave left a minute later and then Frankie left. I—" Her voice cracked on the upbeat. "I never saw him again."

"Did he make his own meal here or did you prepare it for him?"

The sleuth's technique was something to observe. He didn't ask if Frank had eaten anything Sunday in this house. Crept up on his questions from behind.

"I told you when I saw you Sunday that Frankie hadn't been home all night and next morning. He didn't return till Sunday afternoon, and then he—" The handkerchief flew to her mouth. "Eat! Then you think he was—that it was something he ate?"

The sleuth said: "Dr. Kendrell hasn't completed the autopsy." His way of saying: I'll do the asking and you do the answering. He put a match to his pipe. "He must have eaten something between Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon."

"As far as I know, all he had in this house was a drink."

"A drink of what?"

"Whiskey."

"When was that?"

"Right after Dave left. I went into the bathroom to wash up, and when I came

out he was taking a drink."

"Did you wash the glass?"

"He drank right out of the bottle."

Without conscious effort, Rachel was trying to tear the handkerchief to pieces. "But I'm sure he didn't have anything to eat here. Of course he might have been here the half-hour I was away to see you and taken something from the refrigerator—there's cold chicken—but I doubt it."

Helm said: "Where's the whiskey?"

"In the kitchen cabinet." Her dark eyes moved past Helm, rested on me for an instant, dropped to the tight fist in which she had crushed her handkerchief. "Do you want me to get it?"

Helm nodded, but he was at her heels when she went into the kitchen. Stark shifted his position so that he could see them after they were out of my own sight. Not a muscle in my body moved. I found myself holding my breath.

IN A matter of seconds Rachel reappeared with the sleuth still behind her. He was carrying a paper bag twice as big as it had to be for what was in it. Held the bag gingerly by the top. When he reached the table, he carefully set the bag down with its contents upright, pulled back the opening of the bag to expose the long neck of a whiskey bottle. Between thumb and forefinger he removed the cork.

"You'll spoil prints!" Stark yelled a warning.

"Not on this cork." Helm pushed his nose down to the mouth of the bottle. Then sniffed, frowned, stuck the cork back. I wasn't fooled: that was a show to build up tension. His nose couldn't get him anywhere.

"Smell anything?" Stark asked eagerly.

"I smell very good rye." Helm closed the bag. "But we'll see."

I said: "Your notion is cockeyed. Any thing dropped into that bottle might have poisoned anybody at all. That's no way to select a particular victim."

He turned to Rachel. "Do you drink, Miss Townsend?"

"Social drinking only. I never drink alone."

"But your brother did."

Rachel was back in the chair, sitting listlessly, giving an impression of slumping without quite letting her body go. Now she sat upright, a little of the old fire coming back into her eyes. "Frankie wasn't

a sot. The only solitary drinking I ever saw him do was a nip before meals."

"But this was his bottle," the sleuth persisted.

I said: "Nobody would be so stupid as to use the method you're thinking of. There was a chance Frank or Rachel would have company and invite them to have a drink."

Helm looked me over impassively. "You were home Sunday when Miss Townsend came home. How'd you get in?"

"I found the door unlocked."

Rachel put in with more vigor than she'd shown for some time: "I seldom lock the door unless I intend to be gone for some time."

"Uh-huh. So anybody could have come in."

"Well, we knew somebody who was here alone for a while," Stark said and handed me another hard look.

I said: "I'll lay odds you're wasting your time with that bottle."

Evidently the sleuth wasn't a betting man. He patted the paper bag. With ghoulish affection, I thought. "Anything else either of you would like to tell me?"

RACHEL brought her handkerchief back to her mouth. I stuck a cigarette between my lips. Neither of us had an answer for him. Not even when he said good-night and the sheriff echoed him. I stood where I was, setting fire to a cigarette, listening to them leave the house and drive away.

The tableau held, she sitting, me standing, neither of us looking directly at the other. The silence tied up my nerves. I went to an ashtray, crushed out the cigarette after only a couple of puffs, said: "I'm taking you out to eat."

She raised her head then. "Why don't you go back to Beverly? You don't have to worry about Frankie now."

She'd recovered that old sarcasm of hers, but now with a bitterness that cut like a scalpel.

"That's over," I said. "I've stopped being able to feel one way or another about her."

"For how long?"

"Oh, hell!" I said. "Let's go out and eat."

"No." She slumped back on her spine. For the first time since I'd known her she was without her lithe grace. Little of her

animation and high color in her face, and without it she was just any female.

I said: "Are you afraid of me? Because of what might be in that bottle besides rye?"

"Dave!" She was on her feet and staring at me. As if I were a vicious looking stranger who'd come upon her suddenly in a lonely place. "Don't ever say that, Dave."

"Then don't make me say it. Come out to eat. Get out of this house for a while. Stop tearing yourself to pieces."

She tossed her head. Loose hair flew. Wide, full mouth smiled recklessly. "I'll be with you in a minute, Dave." Shoulders squared, slim body straight now as she left the room.

I prowled the living room. Took deep breaths to loosen the load on my chest. The load pushed down farther, a dead weight in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't get rid of it.

Being a woman, she was in her room a lot longer than a minute. When she came out, she had a simple dress on. A simple white affair that went great with her black hair and eyes. Face tastefully renewed. She looked good.

I had as good an eye as the next man for a pretty girl and I'd known all along she was easier to look at than most. But I doubted if I'd ever realized before how very good she looked.

She came to me with that set smile she'd worn when she left me. As if she'd pasted it on as a permanent fixture.

CHAPTER XVII

Ben Helm

*Monday, May 19
8:27 P.M.*

STARK told me proudly that the day after he took office as sheriff he sent away for fingerprint paraphernalia, and a book on how to use it. The stuff was in a small valise in a small closet in his small office in the county building. Also in the valise was a cardboard file containing a hundred or so sets of local citizens' fingerprints he'd obtained in one way or another.

Scientific crime detection had come to Cagula County.

"Guess we want Frank and Rachel Townsend first," he said, fumbling through

the cards. "Here's George Atwood's too. Got these only a couple of days ago. They're copies of the prints the state police took Tuesday night when they had hopes the killer maybe left a print or two in the kitchen."

He spread newspaper on the desk and dusted Frank Townsend's bottle of rye. As he worked, what little confidence he had evaporated.

"Maybe we ought to let the state police do it," he suggested glumly. "They got a real expert."

"Who's two hundred miles away, you told me. We don't get a report till tomorrow, and it'll take them even longer to analyse the whiskey. I'd like some answers in a hurry for once, before there's another corpse."

He gave me a startled look. "You don't think—"

"I don't know what to think," I cut in testily. "But I'd like some sort of answer now."

Stark sighed and rummaged through the valise. He took a long minute to find a magnifying glass. He frowned through it at the bottle, then frowned at the print cards, then at the bottle again, then looked at me in embarrassment. "I guess I'm not so good reading them."

Angrily I snatched the magnifying glass from him. His pale, watery eyes looked as if I'd slapped him. I felt like a heel. I had nothing against the sheriff personally. It was the police set-up I resented, or more properly speaking the lack of one, where even the hunting for fingerprints on a bottle became a major and uncertain project.

But what I really resented was myself, for having let Frank Townsend die.

I concentrated on the bottle. A label in front and another in back covered more than half the surface. The glass was clean except for an unreadable smudge or two and one fine Whirl between the labels which matched up with Frank's thumb. And on the long neck there were a couple of Rachel's Tented Arches close together.

"Then it's this bottle," Stark exclaimed excitedly when I told him what I'd found. "I mean, a whiskey bottle's handled a lot and should be all covered with prints. So it was wiped clean before Frank took it out of the kitchen cabinet yesterday. Who'd wipe a bottle if it wasn't to wipe off prints?"

"Uh-huh. Frank held it around the

middle, his hands mostly over the labels. Later, when Rachel took it back to the kitchen, she held it by the neck. But that doesn't mean anything unless we know what's inside."

I dropped the bottle back into my pocket. Stark put his paraphernalia away and we left the building and drove a quarter of a mile in his car to the Grayson Funeral Home on Division Street.

THE funeral parlor was a store between a tailor shop and a food market. Coroner Abel Torrey was sitting in the hushed, dimly lit room in front. He nodded somberly to Stark and me.

"I was in there watching Doc Kendrell cut up the body," he told us, "but it made me sick to my stomach. He don't want to say what he's found till he's through."

I went through a door which led to the rest of the funeral parlor. Stark started to follow me, but changed his mind. In this community both the sheriff and the coroner hadn't the stomachs for cadavers.

I stepped into a cramped office. Grayson, the undertaker, a slender, middle-aged man as stiffly dressed as a bank teller, sat behind the desk. Dr. Raymond Kendrell was getting into his jacket and telling Grayson that arsenic had been the favorite poison of the Borgias.

"So it was arsenic?" I said.

Dr. Kendrell grinned cheerfully at me. He was a breezy young man with a build like a football guard.

"Loads of arsenic," he said happily. "Of course this is only a preliminary post mortem. I'll save the kidney, spleen, lung, heart, hair and the rest for tomorrow. I've got a call to make and my wife has company and wants me home. But I found enough arsenic in the stomach and intestines to state definitely that death resulted from the oral ingestion of the poison."

"Food in his stomach?" I asked.

"Surprisingly little. I'd say he ate almost nothing for twelve hours before his death, probably longer. That's one thing that makes it so hard to pin down the time of death even approximately. If you want me to stick out my neck, I'd say some time between Sunday night and early Monday morning."

"I suppose there's no telling when he took the poison?"

"You suppose right. A couple of hours before death or a couple of days. Perhaps

a toxicologist can give you the hour and minutes, but I doubt it. Arsenic works differently on different people. Don't expect more from me. I'm merely a general practitioner."

"The doc is modest," Grayson assured me. "You should see the laboratory he has in his house."

"Just a hobby." Dr. Kendrell ran a comb through his wavy hair. "In my spare time I hunt for the Elixir of Life."

"Can you hunt for arsenic in this?" I handed him the bag containing the bottle.

"Easy. This is where it came from, eh?"

"That's what I want you to find out."

He studied the label. "What a grisly idea, ruining good rye with arsenic."

Grayson laughed uproariously. "The doc's got a sense of humor," he explained to me.

DR. KENDRELL and I went out to the front room or sitting room or whatever it's called in an undertaking establishment.

I was telling Stark and Torrey about the arsenic when Grayson stuck his head through the door. "There's somebody on the phone wants to know what Frank Townsend died of. What do I say?"

"Ask him his name," Stark said excitedly.

I said, "I'll take the call," and went into the office and settled myself in Grayson's chair with the phone. "Hello?"

"Is this you, Grayson?" It was a quiet, modulated voice I recognized at once.

"No," I said.

"Who is this, please?"

"Ben Helm. What did you want to know, Mr. Atwood?"

He was silent, and for a moment I thought he'd hung up. But he had too much sense. He said: "I'm curious to know how Frank Townsend died."

"Why?"

"What's that?"

"Why are you curious?"

George Atwood took time to decide on an answer. "As I recall, you were the one to stop me on the street this afternoon to inform me that Townsend was dead. I have been wondering if you did so because you considered that I could possibly be concerned."

"Somebody fed him arsenic."

"I see. Well, good-night."

"Wait a minute," I said. "If you're so

curious, aren't you curious to know who did it?"

"Do you know?"

"Somebody who likes a variety of weapons."

"Oh, then you think it was the same person who murdered Matterson?"

"And Mike Parker."

"Parker!" His voice rose an octave on the name; then dropped to its normal key. "I see. Good-night, Helm."

I said quickly: "For a curious man, you have a monumental lack of curiosity for details."

"It appears to me that the finality of death makes all other details unessential."

"Not to the police it doesn't. Or to the murderer."

"It happens that I am neither," Atwood said dryly. "Good-night."

This time I let him hang up.

WHEN I returned to the others, I found that Dr. Kendrell had left to keep an appointment with a patient. Torrey went soon after to discuss with District Attorney Fleet the result of the autopsy. Stark remembered that he hadn't eaten since lunch. Neither had I.

We left his car in front of the funeral parlor and walked a short distance to a lunchwagon called Twin Elms. The place was spotless and wasn't over-laden with the smell of greasy cooking, but as soon as I stepped through the sliding door butterflies fluttered in my stomach. The counterman extolled his pot roast and Virginia ham, either of which should have tempted famished men, but when Stark ordered blueberry pie and coffee, I did the same.

"Get a nervous stomach at times like this," Stark confided. "I didn't eat for two days when Mr. Matterson was killed. Looks like you ain't hungry either, Ben."

"It's a hell of a case," I said.

"Ain't an experienced man like you hardened to murder cases?"

"No. And I never will be."

When we finished eating, we drove to Dr. Kendrell's house. Mrs. Kendrell, a svelt young redhead, answered the door. From behind her flowed sounds of a party or of noisy company. Her husband had seen his patient and was now in his laboratory, she informed us coldly as she shunted us through a side door in the vestibule and into a two-by-four waiting room. Then she said bitterly that she

hoped patients and policemen would let him occasionally have a life of his own, and shut us in.

Fleet and Torrey were already there. As usual, the coroner was doing nothing. The district attorney paced the room and worried a dead cigar with his teeth.

"You sure it's in the bottle?" Fleet demanded.

"We'll know soon enough."

"What will we know—that there's been another murder?" Fleet removed the cigar from his mouth and gave me a beady eye. "What have you been doing, Helm? We bring you in to solve one murder and you let another man get murdered under your nose."

There was nothing I wanted to make of that. I took out my pipe.

"Ben done his best," Stark came to my defense, though I'd rather he'd kept quiet. He rubbed his skimpy chin contemplatively. "Fact is, I've been thinking that this murder has nothing to do with the other murders." He peered from Fleet's face to mine to see what effect his pronouncement had.

FLEET stopped prowling. He looked at the tip of his cigar as if to read an answer on it. Slowly he nodded. "It has occurred to me that in this case the *modus operandi* is different."

"The which?" Stark said.

"*Modus operandi*—the method or mode of operation." Fleet struck a lecturing pose. "It is well-known in criminology that criminals tend to use the same technique over and over in the commission of their crimes. Both Parker and Matterson were killed with weapons immediately at hand. Townsend was poisoned, a completely different *modus operandi*."

"There's nothing gaudy about arsenic," I said. "It's as common as a shotgun or a bean pot."

"But poison means careful preparation beforehand. It indicates a far more calculating temperament than snatching up a bean pot at the spur of the moment." Fleet sighed and didn't seem particularly impressed with himself. "You don't agree, Helm."

I said: "I like psychology as well as the next man, but I'd say that in each case the murderer selected whatever weapon and method was most convenient at the time."

Torrey spoke up brightly. "They all

had one thing in common. They was murdered." When nobody reacted to his unusual display of wit, he subsided to glumly study Dr. Kendrell's medical school diploma framed on the wall.

The topic died. Fleet resumed prowling the room which was as cramped as a cage. Stark turned pages of a picture magazine. I thought of Dr. Kendrell's attractive wife and wished that I was with mine and wondered what madness had made me choose this lousy profession.

Presently Dr. Kendrell came briskly into the waiting room.

"That was it," he announced cheerfully. "Good rye ruined by loading it with arsenic."

None of us had an immediate comment. Probably we were busy remembering where that bottle had come from.

"When I say loaded, I mean loaded," Dr. Kendrell went on. "Two grams in the half-pint left in the bottle. Under normal circumstances, ought point one to ought point five is considered lethal. Whoever spiked that whiskey wasn't taking a chance that it wouldn't be effective."

"Wouldn't Townsend have noticed the taste?" Fleet asked.

"Arsenic is odorless and practically tasteless, especially when dissolved in a strong drink. That's why it's been so popular throughout history."

I said: "Was the arsenic in a pure state?"

"Offhand, I'd say rat poison."

"You mean those hard little balls of rat poison was dropped right in the bottle?" Stark said incredulously.

Dr. Kendrell grinned. "And eaten by mistake for a cocktail olive? I don't know what form the poison was in, but it was completely dissolved. If I were doing it, I'd dissolve the arsenic in whatever state in boiling water, then let it cool and pour the result into the rye. Probably that's how it was worked—the poison prepared and bottled in advance. That would cut the rye, but not more than in some bars I could mention."

"Are you stating definitely that it was rat poison?" I asked.

Dr. Kendrell lost some of his exuberance. "Well, I'm not a toxicologist. I haven't the equipment here for all the necessary tests. I think it came from rat poison, but I won't give my affidavit on anything beside arsenic." He looked at his watch. "How about letting me have a couple of

hours of my own life before my wife breaks my neck?"

STARK, Torrey and I went out and stood on the sidewalk. Up the street was a corner of the hedge which bounded the Matterson place, and beyond that the Atwoods lived.

"So what if we find rat poison in anybody's house?" Stark complained. "It wouldn't mean a thing. I got it in my own house."

Fleet came out with the bottle in the paper bag. He intended to send it to the state police toxicologist.

"This is awful," he said, coming up to us. "Two murders in a row and the second one disposes of our chief suspect for the first."

"Three murders," I reminded him.

"If we include Parker, three, but officially he met his death by accident. My God, doesn't the record look bad enough with two murders?" Fleet yanked open the door of his car, recklessly dropped the bottle on the seat, whirled back to me. "And we haven't got anywhere, Helm. Not an inch since you came to Rexton, and there's a homicide maniac running around loose."

"Don't you mean two homicidal maniacs?" I mocked him gently. "Remember your *modus operandi*."

Fleet took it in stride. "I'm not saying these murders aren't connected, but there could be more than one killer. For instance, Frank Townsend murdered Parker and Matterson, then he in turn was murdered in revenge—say by his sister who was in love with both his victims."

"Aw, no!" Torrey said. "His own sister!"

"You'd be surprised how much murder goes on inside a family. Half the murders in the papers are husbands and wives killing each other or fathers chopping up their families and so on." Fleet stuck out his meaty jaw. "Frank struck her, didn't he? There's one thing you overlook, and that's the crude and clumsy and unreliable method used. How could the murderer know Rachel wouldn't offer a guest a drink from that bottle or that Frank wouldn't invite friends in for a drink? But the fact is Rachel could control that bottle, and she was the only one who could. Living in the house, she could see to it that nobody but her brother drank from it."

Stark didn't care for that. "She'd be dumb to put the bottle back in the kitchen cabinet after he'd drunk the poison from it."

"Or smart." Fleet was getting warmed up; if given a chance, he'd talk all night. Spreading himself out on a subject with words gave him the illusion that he was doing something about it. "Because it wouldn't be logical for her to hang onto the bottle, the fact that she did would be a red herring to divert suspicion from herself. Of course, at the same time we mustn't overlook Dave Reese, who has all the motive and opportunity the murderer needed."

"Uh-huh," I said disgustedly. "And the three Atwoods and Ed Wonder and likely several others we haven't tagged yet. Why not put all their names in a hat and pick one out?"

Fleet sighed. "Is that the way you work, Helm? For all that you've accomplished, the hat method may well be the one you rely upon."

MAYBE he had something there. I was beginning to think so myself. I had ideas, plenty of ideas, but that was the trouble. One was all I needed—the right one.

I said sourly: "I told you when I arrived that if you wanted a superman out of a book the county was throwing away money on me. I'm merely an investigator."

"Then why do you make snooty cracks when I try to help you?"

"Because standing here and beating our gums doesn't get us anything but conversation. Anybody could have done it, and I doubt if there's a convincing reason for all three of these men to have been murdered."

Stark nodded vigorously. "Sure, a madman."

"No," I said. "No killer is normal, of course, but we're not dealing with a madman running amok."

"I'm trying to follow you." Fleet spoke with taunting patience. "The murderer has no motive for three murders and at the same time is perfectly sane."

"Not the kind of motive that makes sense to anybody but the murderer," I told him. "In all my experience I've never come across a murder that was worthwhile, even from the murderer's point of view. There are few murders for grand

stakes and from grand passions. Most of those kind belong to history. What we generally have is a woman's head beaten in by a poker because she refuses to pay two dollars and twelve cents she owes. A man shoots his wife and children because his supper is cold. Naturally it goes deeper than that; the motive has to be found outside the victim and deep inside the murderer, and often it has little to do with the act itself. Did you ever beat your fist against a wall in rage? You're not angry at the wall, but the act helps get out from inside you whatever's eating you."

"A mental quirk which causes an outburst in the form of murder," Fleet said, demonstrating that he was right up there with the heavy thinking. "A policeman has to be a psychologist. Fine, but where has your psychology got you in this case, Helm?"

I tapped out my overheated pipe on my heel. "Hell, I'm going home and get some sleep."

"That's a good idea for all of us." Fleet was suddenly almost amiable. "Our nerves are upset by this terrible mess. Tomorrow we'll be fresher. Can I drive you home, Helm?"

"I prefer to take a walk, thanks."

I waited until the three men had each driven away in his own car before I moved. I walked away from my boarding house, toward the Matterson and Atwood houses.

CHAPTER XVIII

Beverly Atwood

Monday, May 19
10:43 P.M.

FRANKIE was coming down the street. A terrible coldness gripped my stomach and spread up to my chest. He's coming back, I thought, because he loves me so. Coming to me from the grave.

I locked a scream in my throat, but something came out of my mouth. It was a crazy laugh that frightened me even more than seeing Frankie.

Though of course it couldn't be Frankie. The dead stay dead. I stood up so I could see him more clearly on that dimly lit street.

Just then he started to cross the street diagonally toward the house and came within range of the street light, and I saw

that he was Ben Helm.

He walked the way Frankie used to, with firm, athletic, confident strides. He was not nearly so big, but the shadows had distorted his size.

All the same, my fright had been perfectly ridiculous.

Behind me in the house Mother said to Daddy: "Dear, isn't there anything else on the radio?" Daddy didn't answer her. He had a way of not answering Mother when she asked him to do something, and tonight his mood was especially bad.

I went off the porch steps. I was standing at the side of the driveway when he passed it.

"Ben," I whispered.

He stopped walking and peered in my direction. It was dark where I stood with a barberry bush at my back, but not so dark that I was completely invisible. He came over.

"Hello, Beverly."

I kept my voice low so I wouldn't be heard in the house.

"Did you come to visit me, Ben?"

"At this hour?"

"You were coming to the house."

Though there wasn't enough light, he looked me over the way a man looks a desirable woman over.

"All right, call it a visit," he said.

I put a hand on his arm.

"Let's not stand here talking," I said.

"Let's go to the arbor in back."

Ben didn't come along at once. He looked over my head and over the barberry bush at the house. The living room windows were bright with light and there was the sound of a radio voice speaking in a monotone. Then Mother's voice rose above the radio voice. "Dear, can't you find music on the radio?"

"Let's go," Ben said. He too was whispering now.

There was just enough moonlight to keep us from groping blindly, though not enough for him to see clearly the unfamiliar path between the flower beds. He tripped against the stones which lined the path. I reached for his hand and guided him.

His hand was warm and firm—the strong hand of a strong man.

But I didn't get any feeling out of holding hands with him. Saturday afternoon it had been very exciting being alone in the same room with him, but that had been

Saturday.

How could a girl feel anything about any man when there was such a heavy load on her chest?

WHEN we were in the arbor, he slipped away from me. It was so dark in there that it was like keeping your eyes closed. I started to move to find him when he spoke.

"So this is where Dave Reese watched you kiss Frank Townsend?"

He was a horrible man. He always said the thing you didn't want said.

I shouldn't have brought him here. But where else could I be alone with him?

"You must think I'm awful," I said. "But it could happen to any girl. Frankie and I were standing right here and talking, and all at once I was swept off my feet. I didn't want—I didn't mean . . ."

I stopped, and I was panting.

What I told Ben was the truth. I'd been anxious for Frankie to leave before Dave arrived, and I certainly wouldn't have kissed him—not at that time, anyway—and all at once there had been a kiss and it hadn't been like any other kiss.

There was something about Frankie, a brute vitality—

I was using the present tense in thinking of him. Frankie had become past tense.

"When did you hear that he was dead?" Ben asked me out of the darkness.

"This afternoon Daddy came home and told me. It was an awful shock."

"Because he was dead or because of the way he died?"

Did he mean because the same thing had happened to him as to Mike and Rudy?

"Naturally I was shocked and grieved." I found myself clearing my throat. "Was Frankie murdered?"

"Didn't your father tell you?"

"Daddy didn't know."

"He phoned me a couple of hours ago at the funeral parlor, and I told him that Frank had been poisoned."

For a little while then it was as if I were alone in the arbor. He made no sound, no move. He was part of the black darkness.

DADDY hadn't said a word to me or Mother all evening. He had been remote and tired-looking during supper, and right after he'd gone up to his room

and stayed there till ten-thirty, though I remembered now that he had come down to make a phone call and had gone right up again. The second time he'd come down had been just before I'd gone outside to sit on the porch steps because my nerves hadn't been able to stand the closeness of the house. Without a glance at Mother or me, he had taken a book out of the bookcase and hunted through it and left it open on the table and then had gone to the radio to turn on the ten-thirty news. He'd stood leaning against the radio and there had been such a faraway look on his face that I didn't think he'd even listened to the news.

He hadn't mentioned that he knew Frankie had been murdered.

The darkness and the silence in the arbor were like madness. I had to ask Ben: "Was he poisoned?"

"Somebody slipped into his house and dropped arsenic in his bottle of rye."

A match flared and hovered over his pipe. For the first time tonight I could really see his face, but it was a flickering ghost face suspended in space. Then the darkness returned.

There had been something terrible and remorseless about that face, but it wasn't a face a girl couldn't like. I didn't have to force myself to take the few steps to him.

I touched his shoulder. My fingers trailed lingeringly down his sleeve to the back of his hand.

He jerked away from me as if I were contaminated.

What had he to be so snooty about? The men I knew were happy if I so much as smiled at them.

"You needn't think I want to throw myself at you," I said huffily. "I'm not like that Rachel Townsend."

"What about her?"

"Don't try to pretend you're not having an affair with Rachel. It's all over town."

He laughed softly.

"That's an abberation of my landladies."

The bowl of his pipe glowed. He was the most difficult man I had ever known.

"You don't like me," I said.

That always worked. The men protested that they did and before they knew it they were telling you how much.

But Ben didn't.

"I haven't thought about it. Besides, you're not a safe girl to make love to."

Dear God, he meant what had happened

to Mike, then Rudy, then Frankie! Without touching me, he was tearing me to pieces.

I went toward the small, flat glow of his pipe and stopped only when our bodies touched.

"Please, Ben, don't be mean to me. I need you so much."

He took the pipe from his mouth because my face was so close to his, but that was the only movement he made.

But at least this time he didn't run away from me.

"Need me for what?" he asked.

I shouldn't have put it that way. He picked up every word I said and turned it against me.

I gave him the best answer a girl can give a man. I threw my arms about him.

"Honey," I whispered, "you do something to me. You're not like any man I've ever known."

He was as animate as a stick of wood.

"Honey, I'm a—a woman."

I felt the breath of his laughter against my forehead.

"Uh-huh, you're a woman. That means that when you're in a corner you call on your sex appeal to get you out."

"You're so wrong. I brought you here because I'm crazy about you."

"Or is it that you're merely trying to store up good-will for possible contingencies?" he went on as if I hadn't said what I'd said, as if I weren't pressed against him.

I made myself go limp against him and put a swoon in my voice.

"Ben, I feel so alone."

"What can you expect when your boy friends have a habit of getting themselves knocked off?"

I COULD have killed him as he stood there with no reaction to me except the most awful wisecracks anybody could think up.

"Though David Reese is still around," he added after a small pause. "With your technique you should be able to get him back without trouble."

"I'm afraid of Dave."

He put his hands on my shoulders, but only to push me away from him. Though not really away from him. He held me at arms length as if peering into my face through the darkness.

"Why are you afraid of him?" he demanded.

I writhed under his grip without trying to break away from him.

"I don't know. I just said it."

"Why did you say it? You must have something to back it up."

"The words just came out. They don't mean anything. I don't like Dave. I don't care for anybody but you, honey."

He gave me a mild little shove and his hands fell from my shoulders.

"Save yourself the trouble, Beverly."

I was breathing harshly. I was trembling.

"God, how I hate you!"

"Uh-huh," he said. "Does that mean I'll be the next victim?"

Just then Mother called me from the house.

I stood alone in the darkness, alone though he was there, so awfully alone in the world.

"Beverly, where are you, dear?" Mother called.

I went out of the arbor into the moonlight. Ben was visible now. He strolled nonchalantly at my side, his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth.

I stopped.

"Stay here, Ben, till I'm in the house."

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you."

There was nothing I could do with him at any time. I hated him, but it struck me that I could love him just as easily.

Side by side, with our shoulders brushing occasionally, we walked to the house.

When we were halfway there, the floodlight which covered the driveway went on. It could be switched on from the hall.

"Beverly," Mother called anxiously.

Then I heard Daddy say: "They're coming from the back yard."

"She's with somebody?" Mother said.

"Did you expect her to be without a man?" Daddy said dryly.

All men were hateful. Daddy wasn't worse than the others. I had thought so only because I had known him longest.

Mother was waiting for us at the side of the driveway as we walked in the glare of the floodlight. Daddy was on the porch, leaning against the rail.

"Good-evening," Ben greeted them.

Daddy nodded briskly.

Mother gave Ben a gracious smile.

"I had no idea you had called on us, Mr. Helm," she said.

"I happened to pass and saw Beverly on the porch and stopped to chat. We took a

stroll through your garden."

Then there was a silence. I waited for him to start with his eternal questions. Probably Mother and Daddy were waiting for the same thing.

This time he didn't.

"Well, I'll be pushing along," he said. "Good-night."

HE WALKED to the sidewalk and turned left. For a little while after he was out of sight we continued to look in that direction.

Mother was the first to rouse herself.

"It's eleven o'clock, dear."

I went ahead of her into the house and right upstairs to my room. A few minutes later I heard Mother come up to her room, then a minute later Daddy came up.

He stopped in front of my door and knocked.

I opened the door and stood there, as if he were a stranger trying to get into my room. The last thing I wanted to do now was to speak to anybody, especially to him.

"Let him alone," Daddy said.

He looked very small and gaunt and tired. But his tone was firm and angry.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Ben Helm's a married man. For heaven's sake, Beverly, do you need married men too?"

I tried to hold in my own anger.

"Why do you always think the worst of me, Daddy?"

"Because you always give me reason to."

I gripped the edge of the door. I felt my voice rise hotly in my throat.

"You're a nasty old man with a nasty mind!" I flung at him.

And I slammed the door in his face.

The house was very still. Daddy didn't make a sound outside in the hall.

I didn't care what he thought, what anybody thought.

I was so terribly, terribly alone. I wished I were dead.

CHAPTER XIX

George Atwood

Monday, May 19
11:25 P.M.

I WAS a nasty old man with a nasty mind. I had lived to hear my daughter

call me that.

Through the door panel I heard her weep. I had not moved from before her door; I stood as if transfixed by Medusa. At the sound of her grief, compassion touched me, and also shame. The slamming of that door in my face was a climax as inevitable to all that had happened between us through the years as the shattering triumph of fate in a Greek drama.

What right had I now to judge a daughter to whom I had never been a father?

My hand closed over the doorknob. I paused in that position, calling up courage to enter her room and ask forgiveness for a cruelty which at the least matched her wantonness. But such courage I lacked. My hand fell from the doorknob.

As I passed Kathryn's door, I wondered how she could not have heard our outburst and come out to the hall. All her life she had evaded unpleasantness by ignoring it. Probably that was what she was doing now.

Slowly I descended the stairs. In the kitchen I filled a glass with cold water from the tap. If I were a man who could abide the taste and resultant sensation of strong liquor, I would get drunk. Alcohol could perhaps obliterate . . .

My brain closed over a picture of a man drinking out of a whiskey bottle and then going off to die in loneliness and agony.

With shaking hand I put the water untouched from me. I was halfway up the stairs when I recalled that, as nominal head of the household, I had certain small duties to perform before retiring. I returned downstairs to put out the living room lights; I was moving toward the front door when it proceeded to open toward me.

I believe that I uttered a startled outcry; I may have actually screamed. The dread of watching that door open was almost too much to endure. The second that passed in terrified uncertainty appeared to have no end.

Then Ben Helm's face appeared in the opening. The rest of him followed.

"I was on the porch and saw you put out the living room light," he explained affably. "I didn't ring the bell because I didn't want to rouse anybody else in the house."

My nerves refused to relax. "What do you want?"

"To have a talk with you."

"In order to have a talk with me, did you have to pretend to leave and then

stand on the porch until you ascertained that I was alone?"

"Uh-huh." And with that he sauntered into the living room. Casually he flicked the electric switch and flooded the room with light.

"Just what privileges does being a detective give you?" I demanded.

"Very few. You can kick me out, of course."

AS IF it were inconceivable that I would do such a thing, Helm turned his back to me and crossed the room to the couch.

"I assume that you wish to discuss my inquiry concerning Frank Townsend's death," I said.

He continued to move farther into the room. He did not, as I expected, seat himself and cross his legs and make himself at home as a preliminary to questions. Instead he pulled up one of the couch cushions.

"Still here," he grunted with satisfaction. "I'd hoped she would have left it somewhere else around here, but not for this kind of luck."

I observed that he held a ten-cent notebook in his hand.

"Do you know what this is?" he inquired.

"I know that it is not yours. I'll ask you to replace it where you found it."

"It's Beverly's diary," he stated blandly. "She was writing in it when you and I came in here Saturday afternoon. She stuffed it under this cushion."

I recalled the incident. "How do you know it's her diary?" I demanded.

"I glanced at it when she went out to the hall to answer the phone," he responded without embarrassment. "But I didn't read it."

"You surprise me," I said dryly. "I did not imagine that a detective had a sense of ethics."

"Sometimes it surprises me too." His fingers ran over the edge of the notebook, but he did not open it.

I stepped toward him with hand outstretched. "Give me that. It belongs to my daughter."

Helm did not surrender the book; I had hardly expected him to. His eyes regarded me quizzically. "Speaking of ethics, Mr. Atwood, last Tuesday night who sneaked into Matterson's studio to see if his daughter

ter had posed for any of his paintings."

"That was different. The pictures were on open display."

"The way you did it, it was spying, Mr. Atwood."

"Just what do you want?"

"With your permission, I'd like to read what's in this diary."

"I absolutely forbid it."

FOUR of his fingers gripped the edge of the hard bookcover. If he opened the notebook and read its contents, what could I do? Struggle with him? Hardly. Could I call the police? But he was the police. Later perhaps I could take legal action against him, but that would be after he had accomplished his purpose.

Still he hesitated. "I could have slipped this into my pocket Saturday afternoon. I'm kicking myself because I didn't. A little matter of ethics may have cost Frank Townsend his life."

I said nothing. My mouth was too dry for words.

Then he was extending the notebook to me. I stared at it.

"We can read it together," he declared.

I licked my lips and found my voice.

"What can be in this to interest you?"

"That's what I'd like to find out."

As if by its own volition, my hand moved out and accepted the notebook. You are a nasty old man with a nasty mind, she had said. My hands gripped the book fiercely.

"If I refuse to let you read this," I said, "you will be convinced that I am afraid of what my daughter may have written."

"Or that you have already read it yourself."

Although I had physical possession of the diary, I was helpless before his overpowering personality. I turned from him and started toward the hall door; halfway there I glanced back. He had remained where he was, apparently confident that I would not flee with the book. He was a student of psychology; he knew me better than I did myself.

When I again moved, it was toward the table on my right. There I placed the notebook down flat; as I did so, he came to stand beside me. I opened the book to the first page. It was blank.

Was Beverly still weeping upstairs? Was Kathryn asleep? There was no sound anywhere; no smallest sound from either of

us who stood staring down at an empty page as if the blue lines across it conveyed a decipherable message.

BEN HELM was the one to turn the page. On the second righthand page was Beverly's thin, rather neat script. There may have been previous books of this diary, for the first entry commenced abruptly some eleven weeks ago.

March 4

I told Mike never to phone me at home, but yesterday he did and of course Mother had to answer the phone.

Later Mother asked me who it was, and I couldn't tell her because his reputation in town is so bad, so I said it was a new boy I'd met at Grace's party last week.

Mother is very sweet about the men I go with. She realizes I'm old enough to lead my own life, but she still thinks that girls live in the Victorian age and she'd be very unhappy if she knew I went with Mike.

In fact, Mike has such a bad reputation that I don't let anybody see us together.

I met Mike by the blasted elm and we walked to the brook. It was chilly and I came home early.

I'll have to watch myself with him. He's so demanding.

Sometimes I think I'll drop him, but he does something to me.

(It no longer seemed to matter that if a man had to do a thing like this it should be in the secret of his own conscience. I was committed to read with a stranger my daughter's innermost thoughts and yearnings, and almost my only emotion now was a gagging suspense. What would the rest of these pages reveal?)

March 9

Last night Dave and I drove to Fort Hals and went to the movies there and then on the way back stopped off at a new inn for a midnight snack and dancing.

I think I'll marry Dave.

Eventually, I mean.

A girl wants to have some fun first.

March 10

Yesterday afternoon, Sunday, Frankie

called for me and we went for a walk.

He's like a child. I know he's crazy for me and I really like him awfully, but if I kissed him he'd think I was a fallen woman. What can you do with a man like that?

When I came home, Mother was annoyed because I'd gone out with Frankie. She's very sweet. She never scolds me or tells me what to do or not to do, but she said that Frankie is a rough-neck.

Daddy said the same thing, but nobody pays attention to him.

They think Frankie is an evil influence on me.

That's really very funny.

March 14

This afternoon I was walking along the street when Mike Parker drove by in a truck he uses on the road work and stopped to speak to me.

I didn't want to be seen speaking to him in public, but there wasn't any help for it.

He wants me to meet him tonight. I have a date with Ed Wonder, but Ed is beginning to bore me.

I'm not sure if I should break the date with Ed.

March 15

I'm afraid of Mike.

Last night he was too demanding. I had quite a time handling him.

I don't think I should see him any more. At least not as often as I have been.

March 20

I can't understand why Rudy Matterson never gives me a tumble.

He was here tonight to visit Daddy. He's supposed to be quite a wolf, but he just says hello and good-bye to me and in between, acts as if he didn't know I was alive.

You'd think an artist especially would at least be interested in a face and figure like mine.

I don't say I like him. He's plump and in some ways repulsive. But there's something about him. His manners are so smooth and he's always so sure of himself.

We were all sitting in the living room. Mother was knitting and pretending to

listen to the political argument between Daddy and Rudy, but I'm sure she didn't hear a word. I was there because it was Thursday and I had no date.

The only thing Daddy becomes really violent about is his socialism. He's got the advantage over everybody because he knows so much history, being a history teacher, but Rudy is pretty glib himself. It was about Russia, as usual, Rudy saying that the Russians weren't people like us who could appreciate democracy but needed a strong man to boss them, and Daddy saying what they needed was a revolution to establish democratic socialism.

It was really interesting.

Maybe I'd be less restless if I took an interest in such things. After all, I'm home all day with not much to do except help Mother with the housework. A girl gets bored.

I ought to get active in some sort of cause or organization. A committee for this or against that.

I'd meet a lot of interesting men that way.

Anyway, about Rudy Matterson. For just about a minute tonight I was alone with him. Mother went into the kitchen to prepare coffee and then Daddy went out too.

I asked Rudy how his painting was going. He said so-so.

Then I said: "You know, Rudy, you never invited me to see your pictures."

"My dear child, I live next door," he said. "Any time you drop in you're welcome."

I detest patronizing men.

Then Daddy returned. I didn't wait for coffee. I said good-night and went up to my room to read, but instead I'm writing this.

There's nothing about Rudy Matterson to attract a girl.

(I started to turn the page. Helm put a hand on my wrist and read that entry again. I could hear the thumping of my heart.)

March 24

Met a man last night at a small gathering at Grace's. His name is Ambrose Warrender.

He walked me home and I let him

kiss me good-night, but he's not so much.

March 26

Took a walk with Frankie last night. We had ice cream in town and I got home early, before ten.

I think that if Frankie had a future I'd marry him.

He doesn't even kiss me good-night, but just being with him is exciting.

March 28

I'm restless.

Dave phoned me after lunch and we made a date for tomorrow night, but I'm still restless.

I had nothing to do all afternoon. Around three o'clock I made up my mind to visit Rudy Matterson.

After all, he had invited me to drop in at any time.

I started for the front entrance and then changed my mind. He's a friend of the family and I guess it's all right for a girl to drop in on him, but maybe tongues would start wagging because of his reputation.

I walked all the way around to Willow Road which hasn't any houses on it and runs along the back of Rudy's hedge, and there's an opening in the hedge at the back door of the studio, so nobody would see me go in.

The studio door was unlocked, but he wasn't there.

I'd never been in the studio before. The walls were covered with paintings. There were a lot of nudes, but none of them looked particularly undressed.

For a man who is supposed to be quite something with the ladies he certainly gets very little sex into his nudes.

The pictures are very modern. I don't like them.

I waited for nearly an hour. Then I went home the way I came.

I feel so on edge I could scream. And I don't know why.

March 30

Dave gives me a pain.

Last night he took me to the movies in Fort Hals.

I didn't have a good time.

I'd like him a lot better if only he'd stop brooding and nagging me. He hits the ceiling every time he finds out that I've had a date with another man.

He's especially jealous of Frankie and he saw us walking together in town the other night.

I just looked back over this diary for the last few weeks and saw that I hadn't mentioned three or four times I was out with Dave. That was all having a date with him meant to me.

It isn't that I don't care for him. I'm sure I'll be happily married to him.

He just doesn't make it very exciting for me.

April 1

Today Daddy is in one of his bitter moods.

I'm writing this in the living room and I can hear him striding about the dining room and calling in snide remarks to Mother who's in the kitchen.

Sometimes he's worse than other times, but he's always ready to be nasty.

This time he's claiming a home isn't a real home because Mother thinks more of spending her afternoons sewing clothes for me than preparing him a decent supper.

Mother knows how to handle him. She never gets excited. She merely pointed out that this was the first time in a month she didn't have a veritable banquet ready for him.

Then a few minutes ago he stalked into this room and looked at me for a long time. This was before I'd started writing in this diary. I'd just been sitting here thinking about Mike Parker.

"What do you do with yourself?" he said. "Simply vegetate between dates with men?"

"Why, Daddy, if you want me to go out and get a job say so," I said.

"In heaven's name, why don't you marry David Reese?" he said. "Although it's unfair to ask him to inflict such a fate on himself."

Mother heard what he said, and now she's scolding him from the kitchen and he's answering her from the dining room.

Daddy isn't so bad if you don't take him seriously.

I think I know what's eating him. It never seemed like much of a home to me where the husband doesn't even share the same room with his wife.

Poor Daddy! What he does is take it out on all women.

My husband won't have that problem

with me.

Before I got sidetracked writing about Daddy, I opened this diary to write about Mike Parker.

I haven't really anything to write about him because I haven't seen him in a couple of weeks.

I haven't been able to get in touch with him. I phoned him yesterday and again today, but each time his married sister answered and said he wasn't in.

I bet he's out with some other woman.

Why should I hang around waiting until he reaches my turn?

I think I'll phone Dave. If he's home, he'll drop whatever he's doing and be here in ten minutes.

If Dave isn't in, I'll phone Frankie.

(Helm was reading slowly, as if memorizing the words, and when he completed the entry he turned back to the preceding page to reread the beginning where she discussed me. I would never again be able to look him in the face, or look myself in the face.)

April 2

Ed Wonder keeps phoning me. I get bored simply listening to him on the phone.

Can't he get it into his head that I don't want to see him?

Saw Dave last night. We sat and listened to the radio.

I phoned Mike again this evening and finally found him home.

He said he couldn't see me tonight. Then there was a silence. I have a date tomorrow with Dave to go to a square dance, but I could find a way to break it without making him angry, so I suggested to Mike that we meet tomorrow night at the same place.

Mike said he's busy tomorrow night too.

I was so mad I hung up on him.

I don't mean any more to him than any of the other women on his string. Maybe less. I was willing to break a date for him, which was more than he was.

I don't have to stand for such treatment from any man.

April 5

Last night I went to a square dance at the school gym and had an awful time.

I went with Dave.

Mike was there with Rachel Townsend. That was the date he had that he hadn't wanted to break for me.

And the way she acted with him, practically throwing herself at him in public!

If that's what Mike likes, he'll get none of it from me. I know how to conduct myself in public.

Practically everybody in town was there. Frankie too.

Frankie spent the whole night glowering at me, when he wasn't glowering at the way his sister carried on with Mike. He didn't dance once. I would have liked to be his partner for at least one set, but I was afraid Dave wouldn't like it, so I had to more or less ignore him.

Men are impossible.

Especially Mike, practically flaunting Rachel in my face. Mike always said he didn't like skinny girls, and Rachel is close to anemic.

I could break his neck.

And this morning Frankie came pretty near doing it.

Grace Rubenstein phoned me a short while ago. She'd just heard that Frankie beat up Mike at the job where they're building the road on Crown Hill and Mike is Frankie's foreman. Gracie said Mike fired Frankie after the fight.

I hope the fight wasn't because Frankie found out about Mike and me.

No, he couldn't have. Grace says it was because of the way Mike and Rachel carried on last night. That must be the reason.

What should I do?

Mike is in my blood.

I think Frankie would get into my blood like that if he made love to me, but he never would unless we were married. He's such a big, rough, tough man, and so innocent.

April 7

Mike is dead.

(Only those three words were on the page. *Mike is dead.* I read them over and over until they formed a litany in my brain. "Brevity is the soul of wit," Helm commented dryly. I gave him a dull glance. He averted his eyes from mine and turned the page.)

April 9

I don't feel anything about Mike

being dead.

Not sorry or glad.

Nothing.

April 11

Met Frankie this evening in town by arrangement. I've discouraged him from calling for me at home because my folks object to him.

I don't want to hurt Mother if I don't have to.

We took a walk. Frankie is very sweet when he's alone with me. It's only when people are around that he tightens up and glowers and looks mean.

I could be very happily married to him if only he could get a very good job.

He got another job, but it's only as a chauffeur. For Rudy Matterson, of all people.

He said that Rudy had been south for a couple of weeks and came back a few days ago and offered him the job as soon as he heard that Frankie no longer worked on the road.

So that's why I wasn't able to get in touch with Rudy. I was in his studio again last week. I don't understand why they don't lock it when he's away. I waited for two whole hours.

I wanted to phone Rudy, but I was afraid it wouldn't look right. That's why I didn't hear till tonight that he'd been away.

April 13

Rudy wasn't in his studio yesterday afternoon either.

I have to be very careful now that Frankie is living over the garage. But he can't see me if I slip in the back way.

I feel perfectly ridiculous sneaking in and out of the studio without even meeting Rudy.

And the funny thing is that I don't really like him.

April 16

Drove with Dave to the movies at Fort Hals.

April 19

After all my slipping into Rudy's studio like a thief in the night, I finally met him there in a very simple way.

I was sitting on the porch this morning when he drove by in his stunning new

car and stopped to speak to me. I told him again that I would love to see his pictures. He said come along, but I said I'd meet him there at two in the afternoon.

I went in the back way so nobody, especially Frankie, would see me, and Rudy was there waiting for me.

He explained his pictures to me, all about abstractionist art. Half of the time I didn't know what he was talking about.

I think that what fascinates me is that he's so sure of himself and so mature and so much a man of the world. The other men I know are really no more than boys.

I asked him where he got the models to pose for his pictures.

He said some were professional models and some he copied from other pictures.

"And some are lady friends?" I said, giving him a knowing smile.

He smiled back urbanely.

"Gentlemen don't tell," he said.

There was a small raised platform which was the stand on which models posed. I stood on it and smoothed out my dress. It was the green knit dress Mother had made for me and it certainly didn't hide my figure.

"How would I do as a model?" I said.

I was only teasing him. Of course I would never pose for him, especially with Frankie so close all the time and maybe my face recognizable in the picture.

He looked at me, then shook his head.

"Not you, Beverly," he said.

I felt insulted.

"Don't you like my figure?" I asked.

"It's admirable on the voluptuous side," he said, "but posing isn't what either of us is thinking of. It won't do, my dear child, for two reasons. One, you live too close, which will complicate matters when I tire of you. Two, you are the daughter of my friend. I have my own peculiar moral sense which compels me to eschew the wives and daughters of my friends."

Nobody had ever said anything so outrageous to me. You would think I was offering myself to him.

Nothing of the kind had entered my mind.

I said as coldly as I could that he was completely mistaken about me.

"I'm glad," he said.

I walked out without saying good-bye.
How dared that fat, gross, repulsive creature imagine that I wanted any part of him?

(I am a nasty old man with a nasty mind, I reflected emptily, because I had known my daughter for what she was.)

April 21

Dave can be awfully sweet at times.
My parents were out and we sat in the living room listening to the radio.
He is very anxious for me to marry him right away.

Mother likes him a lot. Daddy does too, and Daddy doesn't like many people, especially when I go out with them.

I think I'll be very happy married to Dave, but right away is much too soon.

April 24

Rudy was here for dinner last night.
Mother didn't want him and she had one of her very mild arguments with Daddy. For once I took Daddy's part.

I'll say this for Mother. When Rudy arrived, she was a most gracious hostess.

Right after dinner I went out to meet Frankie. I was glad I had a date. It would show Rudy that I didn't care to be in his company.

Frankie calls him Mr. Matterson and thinks the world of him. And he had Rudy's car which Rudy lets him use sometimes.

It's funny.

April 28

Had a row with Daddy.

It wasn't really a row. Daddy doesn't operate that way. He just makes nasty cracks which I try to ignore.

It happened this time because I parked in a car with Ambrose Warrender. He's the boy I met last month at Grace's.

Sunday night Dave was supposed to come over. He phoned me at almost the last minute that he couldn't make it because it would be the only time he could get together somebody who was buying a house with somebody who was selling it. Sunday night of all times, but that's the real estate business.

A few minutes later Ambrose Warrender, whom I hardly remembered, phoned, and as I had nothing to do I went with him.

His idea of a date was to drive to the darkest spot he could find and park. He's really very handsome.

How Daddy found out I don't know. I suppose, being a man, Ambrose talked about it and somebody told Daddy, probably at school where those teachers do nothing but gossip all day.

Daddy started making cracks as soon as he came home.

He said sarcastic things like it was a pity that I should undermine my splendid reputation for virtue through a mean little indiscretion like parking in a car with a man when I've so successfully concealed my major expeditions into wantonness.

That's just the way he talks. I'm not sure I've written the sentence the way he said it, but I'm sure about mean little indiscretion and major expeditions into wantonness.

Mother came into the room and told him to let me alone.

She'd heard the whole thing and said there was nothing wrong in a girl going for a drive with a young man, especially if she was a good girl and could be trusted the way I certainly could be.

Mother is a dear and very naive. She's had so little romance in her own life that she doesn't even know what it means to park with a man.

Daddy just looked at her and his mouth twisted in that bitter way of his. Then he went out.

My major expeditions into wantonness. Does he really know anything? If he does, he's the only one.

He's very deep. Sometimes he scares me.

It's not nice to have your own father think such things about you.

I think that he would be very surprised to learn that I'm a virgin.

(Ben Helm uttered a short laugh. "So all she is is merely a little teaser!" I slammed the diary shut. "Sorry, Mr. Atwood," he murmured somewhat contritely. "I should have kept my mouth shut." But it was not only this one thing. It was that I stood with a detective, a stranger, and gazed into my daughter's soul and found that there was very little soul. It was also looking at myself through her eyes and despising what I saw. Helm had reopened the notebook and was continuing to read

the entries. For a while I could not bring my eyes to Beverly's script. He turned a page and then another; I did not read what was on them. Gradually shame and rage seeped out of me, leaving only fear. The detective was not concerned with her character, but with the murder, although there could be a connection. I had to know what was in the remaining pages. When I turned my eyes again to the diary, the date at the top of the page was more than a week later. She was again visiting Matterson in his studio. What had happened between them, if anything, since the last time she had seen him, I had missed.

May 8

This afternoon Rudy kept me waiting nearly an hour in his studio, though I'd told him I'd be there at three.

The back door of the studio is so close to the hedge that nobody from the garage or the house can see me come or go, and Rudy has assured me that nobody who works for him would come to the studio without his permission.

All the same, I felt better when I heard a car leave the garage and from the bit of the driveway I could see through the window saw Frankie drive off.

If anybody read what I'd just written, they'd think I was having an affair with Rudy when the truth is he hasn't even tried to kiss me yet. But people would get the wrong impression if they found out I went there.

Well, I waited and waited and got more and more angry. I looked through some art magazines and then opened a sketch book.

There were two sketches of Rachel Townsend and in one of them her shoulders were bare. At least her shoulders.

You'd think Rachel was deliberately going after all my men. There was Mike and now Rudy and she used to go out with Ed Wonder, though she can have him now for all I care. And she works for Dave and it wouldn't surprise me if she was making a play for him.

Probably she'd be after Frankie too if he weren't her brother.

Then Rudy came in and didn't even apologize for being so late.

I was burning with rage. I practically pushed the sketches into his face.

"The other day you told me you had a moral sense about the wives and daugh-

ters of your friends," I said. "That doesn't seem to include the sister of your chauffeur."

"My dear child," he said in the patronizing way of his, "an artist can sketch an attractive subject without making love to her."

"I bet you wouldn't want her brother to know she comes here," I said.

"For that matter, the same applies to you," he said, looking at me gravely. "Frank is extremely fond of you and would be very unhappy over your visits. I think it advisable that you don't come here again."

It's funny how much I wanted him to kiss me.

Not because he was so attractive, though really he isn't a bad-looking man. He's not actually fat. He's just a big man and not as big as Frankie, though I guess a lot softer, and he's so urban and worldly.

He wouldn't be brooding and jealous all the time like Dave or afraid to even hold hands with a girl like Frankie. I wanted to show him that I could make a man like him kiss me.

I cuddled up to him.

"Well, I'm here now," I said.

He got a little pale around the lips.

"I think you'd better go," he said.

And instead he went. He just turned and went out and left me there alone.

Well, I know now that he reacts to me. He didn't kiss me, but kisses aren't everything.

I'm sure he cares a lot for me.

(It was a form of recreation for her, I thought. Some women played bridge, some went in for tennis, some were active in civic organizations. She collected men. She was not vicious. She was many other things, but she was not vicious.)

May 9

This afternoon I had to do some quick thinking on Rudy's terrace.

I met Rudy on the street and we stopped to talk and he invited me to his house for tea.

"I thought you didn't want me to come," I said.

"I referred to surreptitious visits to the studio," he said. "It's perfectly proper for you to have tea with me on my terrace."

So I went with him.

The maid set a table on the terrace. It was a lovely spot.

I couldn't help glancing every now and then at the garage.

"If you're worried about Frank, it's his day off," Rudy said.

"I'm not owned by Frank or any other man," I said. "I can visit anybody I please."

"But cautiously," he said, smiling. "I understand that your reputation for virtue is unexcelled in Rexton."

I really did hate him.

"I don't have to stay here and be insulted," I said.

I stood up and started to go off the terrace.

He grabbed my arm and spun me around to him.

"Damn you!" he said.

His face was all screwed up and his eyes were frightening.

Then he kissed me.

He kissed wonderfully.

Then I heard a sound and out of the corner of my eye I saw the maid, Etta Saunders, come out with the tea tray.

In an hour everybody in town would know that I had kissed Rudy Matterson.

I tried to pull away from him. He hadn't seen Etta and held me tight and that gave me the idea.

I started to struggle with him as if he were attacking me. I kicked at him and sobbed. I don't know if he let me go because he saw Etta too or because he was so bewildered by my sudden change or because I broke loose and backed away from him.

I didn't look at him and Etta again. As soon as he released me, I ran off the terrace and didn't slow down till I was out on the street.

It's eight o'clock now and Dave is coming to keep a date with me, but all I can think of is that brief kiss.

Rudy was so supercilious and smug and sure of himself, but I made him lose his head over me right there on the terrace in broad daylight.

If I know men, he'll be after me to come to his studio.

I'll make him do a lot of begging. . . .

("Uh-huh," Helm grunted. "The pure and innocent lass was assaulted by the evil man." I offered no comment.)

May 13

I can't understand why Rudy hasn't got in touch with me.

Yesterday I phoned him. He wasn't in. I didn't leave my name with the maid, of course, but he should have guessed when she told him a woman called and he should have called me back.

Is he too busy with that underfed Rachel Townsend!

Had a date with Frankie last night.

We went to Teepee Inn. I don't care for drinking places because I don't drink, but there was dancing. Frankie dances only well enough to get by.

A very messy thing happened.

Ed Wonder was there. He asked me for a dance, and though I don't like him any more, he dances divinely, so I danced with him. He was a little drunk, but it didn't interfere with his dancing.

Right in the middle of the dance Frankie came out on the floor and he and Ed had words about the way Ed was dancing with me.

There really wasn't anything wrong with the way we danced, but Frankie is like that, and before I could say a word Frankie hit Ed and knocked him right off his feet.

Well, there was a lot of commotion. I tugged at Frankie's arm and made him drive me right home, though it was early.

I was angry. It cheapens me to have men fight over me in public.

Frankie and Ed are really children. Dave is too in a way.

Rudy is the only really adult male I know.

Just before lunch this morning I slipped into Rudy's studio. He wasn't there.

About an hour ago I was going out to the hall to try to get Rudy on the phone when Frankie phoned me. He wants to see me again tonight.

I've more or less of a date with Dave, but he couldn't make it definite. I'm tired sitting at home waiting for men to make up their minds. Rudy doesn't get in touch with me and Dave makes dates when he isn't sure he can keep them.

So I told Frankie all right.

It's six o'clock now and I'm still waiting for Rudy to phone me. I'll wait till seven and then I'll phone him again.

That will be the last time. A girl must have her pride.

May 14

Last night Rudy was killed.

(Five words this time. Five words standing alone on a page, saying too little or too much. My breath was locked in my throat as a fresh page appeared under the flick of Helm's hand.)

May 15

Mike and Rudy both dead.

I was afraid to start writing in this diary today. I wrote the first sentence and now I'm not going to write any more about that.

Last night I was very glad that Dave came. I was glad even though he was in another of his impossible, brooding moods.

He had found out Tuesday night, when we were all in Rudy's house after he was dead, that I had been parking on Crown Hill with Frankie. I had told the district attorney and all the others there including Dave because I'd thought that Frankie needed an alibi for—

No, I'm not going to write a word about it.

Well, last night Dave and I sat on the couch and it was so very good to feel his strong arms around me even in the mood he was in and telling me that he loves me.

He wants to marry me right away. I tried putting him off and at the same time not discouraging him.

Then he insisted that I don't see Frankie again. He said that if I do he's through with me. I think he really means it.

There are other reasons too why I shouldn't see Frankie any more.

(My stomach muscles ached from the slumped position in which I stood. I straightened my body. "It is obvious that she suspected that Frank was the murderer," I commented. Helm glanced side-long at me. "What's obvious," he stated, "is that she's afraid to put down on paper what she knows or thinks about how Parker and Matterson died.")

May 16

I wish I had somebody to talk to. I mean really talk to.

Mother and I are always talking to each other, but about clothes and gossip

and things like that.

I could never dream of confiding in her.

She'd be horrified if she thought I so much as kissed a man, let alone anything else. Except kissing Dave, and in her eyes we're practically engaged, so that makes it all right.

She's so remote from the world. Even when Daddy makes his cracks about me and the men I go with, Mother refuses to believe that he's been anything but mean and making up stories about me.

She's so sweet. She's everything to me but somebody to confide in.

The trouble with Mother is that she's never had any romance in her own life. She doesn't believe in it. She thinks I'm just the way she was as a young girl.

I remember once months ago when I was wiping the dishes and she was baking she started to talk about herself. She was telling me how she'd met Daddy at a church social.

"For a long time I couldn't make up my mind to marry him," she said. "But in those days a high school teacher was quite a catch and so I gave my consent."

"Didn't you love him?" I said.

"I found him interesting company," she said.

"But look, Mother," I said, "wasn't there any other young man you ever loved?"

She was silent for a moment.

"For a while I had a girlish infatuation for the boy next door," she said, "but one evening he tried to snatch a kiss from me. Naturally I would have nothing more to do with him."

"But of course you let Daddy kiss you," I said. "I mean before you married him."

She turned to me with that gentle smile of hers.

"Naturally he kissed me when I consented to marry him," she said.

"And during your engagement?" I said.

"Dear," she said placidly, "I've always considered kissing a rather vulgar demonstration of affection."

I remember thinking then that Daddy got a pretty raw deal. That explained why they'd had different rooms since I could remember.

I hadn't thought about that conversation with Mother since, but suddenly it

all came back to me.

I could confide in Daddy. I think he would understand.

I don't mean tell him everything, of course, or even anything very important, but just talk to him like a friend who hasn't cut himself off from the world.

He's really decent underneath. I think he's lonely and that he would like to have somebody to talk to also.

But I don't really know him. Boys I've gone out with for only a couple of hours I know better than I know him.

As I write this, can hear Mother and Daddy downstairs, but there's nobody in this house can talk to.

Not even about small things about myself.

I feel so terribly alone.

(A mist formed before my eyes. This was the real Beverly. This was my daughter whom I had failed as my wife had failed me. Helm turned the page.)

May 17

Frankie keeps phoning me. I give him excuses, and I told Mother that when she answers the phone to say I'm not in.

Mother is glad. She and Daddy don't approve of Frankie. The real reason I've been meeting him away from the house, though, is Dave.

Frankie is awfully sweet.

He actually kissed me Tuesday night when we parked on Crown Hill. And he asked me to marry him. Even then I was the one who had to kiss him good-night when we parted.

All these years I've known him he'd never kissed me. Imagine!

He kisses wonderfully.

But I've got to make up my mind. It's come to the point where I'll lose Dave for good if I don't give up Frankie.

I have a date with Dave tonight.

"Well, if it has to be one or the other, of course it will be Dave. I don't think I love him more than I do Frankie, but Dave has more to offer a girl.

Sooner or later I'll have to get married and Dave is the best

had not taken up the diary since.

Helm closed the notebook regretfully, like a man, I thought, who had found an old magazine and had read in it one chapter of a fascinating serial story which for him would have no beginning or end.

"Nothing from Saturday afternoon on," he mused. "Afraid that whatever she wrote would be saying too much because somebody might read it."

"She did not make an entry every day," I pointed out.

"A diary is a confidante in which you pour out your emotions. Saturday night Dave Reese caught her kissing Frank in the arbor. From what I hear, she experienced a considerable emotional crisis. But she didn't go to her diary that night or Sunday or today to write of that and other things that happened."

I regarded the detective. Contemptuously he puffed his pipe; I would have given all I possessed to have known what went on in his head.

"She did not know that Frank was dead until I told her late this afternoon," I declared. "She was too upset to write of it in her diary."

"Uh-huh. And maybe too upset Sunday and today before you told her he was dead."

His sentences appeared to be disjointed, indefinite, yet they were fraught with terrible implications. To reply, to attempt to clarify them, would be to fall into his trap by saying more than I intended to say. So I said nothing.

"I suppose you've guessed why your daughter and I were in the back yard," he broke the heavy silence that lay between us. "Gentlemen aren't supposed to tell, but I'm a cop, not a gentleman, and we've both just read the diary and know how she likes to add men to her collection. She took me to the arbor to get me to make love to her. Not because I attract her. Maybe I do—I flatter myself that it's possible—but she was playing for a lot higher stakes. I'm not just another man; I'm a detective working on three murders. She was out to make me fall for her so that, like in the story books, I'd go to bat for her, or anybody else she wanted to protect, whenever she asked me to."

There was still nothing to be said by me.

THERE was no punctuation to indicate an incomplete sentence. She had ceased writing when Helm and I had entered the room Saturday afternoon, and she

HELM moved back to the table and knocked out his pipe in the ashtray. He picked up the book which I had taken

out of the bookcase earlier that night. It lay open on the page I had been reading when I had turned from it to switch on the radio.

"Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*," he said. "These open pages were staring me in the face all the while I was reading the diary."

"Are you interested in literature, Mr. Helm?"

"At the moment," he said quietly, "I am interested in why this book should be open to a poem about a man in prison."

I stepped to his side. "You have read my daughter's version of my relationship. It has not been a pleasant one. It occurred to me that I might be to blame: I recalled certain lines by Wilde and looked them up."

I placed a finger on a stanza and read aloud the first four lines:

*"Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word . . ."*

I drew back my hand. "*A bitter look.* No flattering words from me. *Bitter words.* Are you satisfied now that you have gazed upon the naked anguish of a father? This has nothing to do with you."

He brooded at the open page. "I could paraphrase one line: *Yet each girl kills the man she loves.*"

"You can't escape the pattern, Mr. Atwood," he said with rather startling gentleness. "Three men she loved were murdered."

"But that doesn't mean—" The last word passed my throat in a hoarse croak.

"It means everything, Mr. Atwood. But just what is a different question." He did not raise the question. "As a matter of fact, there are more appropriate lines in this poem if I can find them."

I attempted a sneer. "In this fabulous age policemen are familiar with poetry."

"Uh-huh. Required for a B.A. degree in college." As he spoke, he was occupied with leafing through the book.

I stood thinking how ridiculous it was to search for a murderer in the lines of a second-rate poem. Yet the interval that passed as he ran his eyes down page after page was one of almost unendurable suspense.

"Here is it." He read two lines aloud:

*"For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die."*

With that he laid the book on the table and commenced to fill his pipe with tobacco.

I assayed a laugh. "So I am not only the school teacher you see before you. I have another life in which I am a murderous desperado out of a comic strip."

His gaze rested gravely on me. "That's not what those lines mean, and you know it." He struck a match for his pipe and snapped the brim of his hat which he had not removed in the house. "Well, good-night, Mr. Atwood."

As abruptly as that he departed.

I did not see him to the door. For a long time after he had gone I stood where I was. Presently I picked up my daughter's diary and replaced it between the cushion and the arm of the couch.

CHAPTER XX

Rachel Townsend

*Tuesday, May 20
11:05 A.M.*

I PAUSED in the street to look through the broad window into the office. Dave was sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair and doing nothing.

He didn't greet me when I entered. He looked like a man sleeping with his eyes open.

"Good-morning, Dave."

He nodded, but it wasn't much of a nod. Not more than a vertical twitch of his head.

The remote and in-drawn mood was on him. He got like that whenever he was bothered by something, though I'd never known it to be as bad as Sunday when I'd come home to find him in my house after he'd spent a night and morning agonizing over his precious Beverly not saving her kisses exclusively for him. And this morning he was like Sunday all over again.

There was no air in the office. I laid my handbag on the desk and returned to the door and left it open to admit the warm May morning. As I walked back to my desk, I was facing him again. His eyes moved in their sockets to follow my progress, but there was nothing in them or in the rest of his face.

When I sat at my desk, my back was to him. I felt as if there was nobody behind

me, and somehow that was as frightening as a feeling of somebody crouching at your back with a raised knife. I busied myself with reading the mail. The breeze flowing in through the open door made the envelopes flutter, but there was still something wrong with the air in the office—or with me. I was choked up.

Dave spoke suddenly. "You shouldn't have come in today." It was an objective, disinterested statement in monotone.

"I didn't intend to." I continued to open the mail with my back to him. "But after a while I decided that it was better working and being with people than staying alone in the house."

That ended the conversation.

The silence that returned between us was worse than being alone. In the empty house you kept remembering Frankie, not the way he was the last time you'd seen him, but all his innate sweetness and decency and how for years he'd been all you'd really had. Here in the office you tried to close your mind to all but the routine letters you were glancing through, but you couldn't because of the man who sat behind you in awful silence.

I pushed away the mail. I turned in my chair to face him.

"Dave, Sheriff Stark was in my house this morning. He roused me out of bed at eight-thirty. He was looking for rat poison."

His eyes lifted to rest emptily on me. "It was in that bottle of rye. I spoke to Ken Fleet on the phone."

"Dear God, rat poison!"

"Arsenic." Dave brought a pack of cigarettes up to his mouth and extracted one with his teeth. "They're not positive it came from rat poison. They don't expect a report from the toxicologist before tonight." He lifted the desk lighter to the cigarette, then puffed without removing the cigarette from his mouth, as if he had already made too much effort lighting it. "Was there any in your house?"

I STARTED to giggle. I took a deep breath before I dared to bring out the words. "There was a box of mouse seed in the pantry. The sheriff took it with him." The giggles rose violently. I screamed what I said next. "Mouse seed and rat poison!"

Dave jumped from his chair.

With an effort, I regained self-control

before he took more than a couple of steps toward me. "I'm all right, Dave. You're not going to have an hysterical employee on your hands."

I turned back to the mail. I heard him settle in his chair. The curtain of silence, and worse than silence, dropped between us.

Last night you'd had your first date with the man you loved. After that dull-witted sheriff and that invidious detective had gone, Dave took you out to dinner. It wasn't the first time you had eaten with him in a restaurant, but it was the first time he had taken you anywhere when there wasn't a business reason.

Because last night he was sorry for you. Why kid yourself? He would have taken out to dinner anybody whose brother had just died. It was a duty, something to be got through because a person had to eat, and this silence had been between you even then.

But you called it a date because that was what you wanted, and you held it close to you in spite of all that went on inside you, in spite of all the hopes and fears and doubts you tried to banish and could not, trying frantically not to keep remembering that there had been murder and that there was a murderer.

Now here you were at your job with the mail read and not knowing what you'd read, and he sitting behind you in a world in which you had no place.

I swung in my chair, and what I said to him was strident, my nerves shrieking at him.

"Go on, phone her! Or did you phone her already and did she tell you she didn't want you back?"

He looked up. "Who?"

"Whom do you think? The girl you're sitting there tearing yourself to pieces over."

"Beverly?" Startlingly, a piece of his old grin came back. It was as if my outburst had revived him. "The fact is, Rachel, that I haven't given her a thought since last night, and not much more than that since I was at your house Sunday afternoon."

"Then what's eating you?"

The cigarette in the corner of his mouth sent thin smoke across his face. "Can't a man sit and think?"

"About murder?"

That came out by itself. I hadn't meant to say it.

He nodded. "Partly. But do you know what I was doing since you came in? I was watching the way you walk and sit. I was watching the back of your neck and the way your hair is like glistening spun-coal when the sunlight hits it."

I sat half-turned in my chair, looking at him, looking at him.

He took his cigarette out of his mouth and scowled at it. "I'm not saying I loved you all along and didn't know it. At one time I had it pretty bad for Beverly. Well, I've got it for you now. I don't suppose you give a hoot for me, but it's only fair to let you know if you keep on working for me."

"Oh, Dave!"

I know my mouth was half-open and I could actually feel my eyes glow. He leaned forward, poised over his desk like a runner waiting for a starting signal.

"What does that mean—that you care for me?" He spoke with deliberation, as if each word were one to be carefully chosen.

"Dave, you idiot. I've loved you ever since I can remember."

CLICHES. The corny sentences plucked right out of a sloppy romance. But wasn't love a cliché, repeated over and over since the beginning of time? What I'd said sounded exactly right.

He stood up. He tossed his cigarette into the ashtray, ran fingers through his hair, then strode to my desk. I was on my feet when he reached me.

But that kiss was nothing like my dreams of it. It drove coldness through me.

He withdrew his mouth. His eyes, solemn and hurt now, stared down into mine. "Don't you like it, Rachel?"

I looked away from him. "That's not it."

"Listen," he said. "I'm not going to tell you that I didn't kill your brother. If you haven't faith in me, it's no good. We wouldn't have enough to start on."

I felt his arms leave me.

Tears blinded me, and blindly I groped for him, found him, held him to me. This time it was the kiss I had wanted, and it wiped everything else out of my conscious mind.

He ended it too soon—ended it abruptly and with a twist of his torso away from me. No voice should have been there but his and mine, but in the office another voice was speaking smoothly.

"Sorry, but what can you expect when

you choose an office on the street? You can be seen as easily from outside as from in here."

Past Dave's shoulder I saw Ben Helm standing inside the open door. He was sucking reflectively on his pipe.

Dave slipped an arm possessively about my waist. "Okay, snooper, what do you want?"

"Nothing in particular." The pipe dropped into a pocket. "I was passing and dropped in to say hello."

That diabolical detective didn't drop in anywhere to say hello. He hadn't a decent human emotion; whatever he did was for a cold-blooded, calculating purpose.

Dave and I waited for him to go on.

Ben Helm's brown eyes crinkled in that smile I had learned to fear. "Are congratulations in order?"

An angry ridge formed along Dave's jaw. "Is that your business too?"

"Maybe not." There was a lingering inflection on that *maybe*. "Sorry I intruded." And he left.

Left without attending to the purpose of his visit, whatever it was. He'd asked us nothing, told us nothing.

How could you guess what was behind his smile, behind any of his words and acts?

Dave's arm dropped from me. There was a faraway look on his face as he automatically took out his cigarettes.

We didn't kiss again. The detective had ruined it for us.

CHAPTER XXI

Ben Helm

Tuesday, May 20
11:40 A.M.

SLEUTHING, like waging war, consists mainly of waiting for something to happen. If you had an office and men working under you, you could put on a show of activity by letting the normal machinery of the organization function. The scurrying and bustle could be meaningless, and often was, but outsiders would be impressed. For that matter, you'd be somewhat impressed yourself, for doing something if only for the sake of doing something is easier than marking time.

In a small town like Rexton, where I was practically under the eyes of everybody, the best demonstration I could make of

working for my pay was talking to people and walking down the street looking profound.

When I approached David Reese's real estate office, there was another place where time could legitimately be passed. I turned in, and before I was through the open doorway I saw Reese and Rachel Townsend ardently kissing.

Almost any other man would have had a decent regard for moment and have gone about his business. But a detective on a case wasn't supposed to have the reactions of almost any other man. A kiss could perhaps be his business, and what was said and done when he broke it up could have significance.

A couple of minutes later I was back on the street.

I crossed to the other side of the street and turned, and even from there I could see halfway into the office. Rachel was standing at her desk and facing the rear of the office, evidently speaking to Reese, whom I couldn't see, but who must have been at or near his own desk farther back. Anybody who'd passed at the time of the kiss would have observed it. That office was hardly the place for private love-making.

Which meant that the kiss hadn't been haphazard or so usual that it could be delayed for the proper time and place. Even the rear of the office would have been more advisable. They'd been swept into each other's arms, forgetting that they were practically on public display.

Well, if I were to suddenly meet Greta, I wouldn't care where I kissed her as long as I kissed her. But Greta was my wife, and I hadn't been in love with another girl a couple of days before.

At noon found myself in the neighborhood of the county building. I went in. The sheriff's office was unlocked, but deserted. No doubt Stark was still hunting for rat poison. When I'd seen him earlier that morning, he'd announced triumphantly that he'd found mouse seed in Rachel's pantry. He'd had quite a letdown when I'd pointed out to him that the box said that the mouse seed contained strychnine.

I WENT up the hall to the district attorney's office. Fleet was in, but left as soon as I entered, asking—or rather telling me to wait. I waited thirty minutes before he returned.

"Well," he demanded, "anything new?"

"I've been questioning the people who live around the Townsend cottage," I reported. "Hoped that somebody might have seen somebody enter or leave the place Saturday night or Sunday morning. Nobody did. I expected as much. The houses aren't particularly close, and there's a path through the woods that goes right up to the cottage."

"It would hardly be evidence if anybody were seen entering that house. We know already that Dave Reese was there, and it doesn't prove a thing against him."

"I guess not," I agreed.

Fleet found his cigar distasteful. He discarded it. A night's sleep hadn't improved his disposition. He growled: "It's all right for you, Helm. You'll collect your fee and leave and never see Cagula County again. I've got to live here. I'll go through life with this mark on my record."

"I doubt it."

He looked eager. "You've got something?"

"I don't know."

"But you think you've got something?" he persisted.

"Uh-huh. I've got several things."

"What are they?"

I shook my head. "What's the good batting it around? I can't put my finger on anything concrete enough to satisfy either of us."

"Hell!" Fleet said. He reclaimed his dead cigar from the ashtray. "I had no right to expect so much from you, Helm. I guess I've been reading too many detective stories."

"Everybody has failures on police cases," I said. "But I doubt if this will be a failure."

He'd lost his capacity for hope. "You're sure of it?" he asked without enthusiasm.

"No," I said. "My understanding is that only death and taxes are sure."

It was considerably after twelve-thirty when I left the county building. I walked rapidly. My landladies had me bullied. Yesterday the matter of Frank Townsend's death had kept me away from supper. When I'd phoned Mrs. Ebling that I couldn't make it, she'd complained bitterly that a leg of lamb, roasted and waiting for me, would be partly wasted. And at breakfast this morning Miss Hoopes had reminded me that I paid for bed and *board*, and that when I skipped meals I was paying for something I didn't receive, and that

they were not women to take money for nothing.

So now I hurried because lunch was served promptly at twelve-thirty.

The front door led directly into the living room, and I swept off my hat when I opened it. Later I reflected that it must have been something like a comedy show, the way I stepped over the threshold and cooperatively bared my head for the blow. Vaguely I recalled that after I'd taken a couple of steps into the room I was aware of a slight sound to my right and behind me. I started to turn toward it.

That was when the floor jumped up at my face.

I DIDN'T feel myself fall. There was the dull impact of the blow, and without transition I was on the floor, sick to the roots of my being, and consciousness slipping away from me. A part of my brain that was unhurt knew that if I let go it would be death. Another blow would follow and another until my head was a pulp.

I struggled within myself. It went on for a long, long time in a half-world between waking and sleeping. I should have been dead a dozen times over in that interval if it had been as long as it seemed. But time must have gone as haywire as in a dream where in a moment you pass through an eternity of events, because when I won the fight over unconsciousness and was rising to one knee, the second blow hadn't yet fallen.

The killer was still there, so close to me that I could sense the menacing presence without seeing anybody. A blurred haze like a curtain of tears blinded me. Behind me I could hear a half-muted cry or sob. Here it comes, I thought, and I swung one arm wildly in an arc, like a man brushing away unseen cobwebs.

My hand slithered past loose cloth. The cry or sob became a frantic yelp. I called up strength to turn, but the one knee supporting my weight wavered. Something crashed to the floor so close that it was thunder in my ears. Then there was another crash, sharper than the first, and I knew that the door had been slammed.

Then there was silence, and I was alone and still alive.

I managed to turn to the door. The furniture danced. I shut my eyes tightly, and when I opened them much of the haze had been dissolved. Before me was the solid

door, blocking out sight of the killer. I was on my hands and knees, crawling toward it, but when I reached the door it struck me that it was not worth the effort to try to open it. Long before this the killer had slipped around the corner of the house, out of sight.

Then I remembered my landladies. They should have heard something from whatever part of the house they were in. I yelled. I called each of them by name. The house maintained its silence.

After a while I tried to stand. I got hold of the doorknob and started to pull myself to my feet. Pain stabbed me behind my right ear like a second blow. I dropped back to my hands and knees and turned from the door.

One hand almost touched a pair of fire tongs. That was my first sight of them since I had seen them this morning with the poker and shovel and broom on the stand beside the fireplace. But I had heard them crash when the killer had dropped them before fleeing through the door.

On hands and knees I crawled across the room. My objective was the phone sitting on a round mahogany table. Once I had to pause to keep myself from passing out.

PRESENTLY I crawled on, reached the table, rested, then slowly, keeping my head and neck rigid, pulled myself up on a chair. I wanted to lie down anywhere and sleep, but first there was something I had to do.

I stretched out a hand for the phone. Beside it lay a sheet of paper torn from a notebook. I found myself staring at the wavering writing. There was a name at the top of the paper. It was my name. I wondered why my name should be on a sheet of paper, and then it came to me that I was supposed to read the note. It said:

Mr Helm

Mrs Wandersen who is chairman of the church bazaar a week from Friday invited my sister and me to eat lunch at her house because we are on the bazaar committee to discuss the bazaar. I hope you will forgive us for not being here to give you lunch but you did not come to supper last night and ruined the leg of lamb and we are not sure you will come for lunch you find lamb curry

on the stove and coffee all made

Sincerely yours

Margaret K Hoopes

I read the note over to see if she had used a single period. She hadn't. It was a form of madness solemnly to consider a literary style while I was fighting to remain conscious. I reached over the note for the phone and dialed the sheriff's number.

"Ben?" Stark said in the tone of a man with a good lunch under his belt. "Practically everybody in town has some rat poison in their house. I found some in—"

"I'm hurt." My voice sounded so small that I wondered if he heard me. "Maybe dying."

"Huh? For God's sake, what happened?"

"I'm . . . I'm at the . . . boarding house."

It was too difficult to talk or sit. My head refused to stay up. I lowered it to the table top, but at the last instant something went wrong. My head missed. I felt myself topple off the chair. . . .

The next thing I remembered I was speaking. I had no idea what I was saying or to whom. Then I became aware of a face hanging over mine. Dr. Kendrell's face, and he was replying to something I must have asked him.

"Not even a fracture," he told me with indecent cheerfulness. "Plenty of skin laid open. You received a rather low, glancing blow that sliced behind your left ear."

I was in my bed. Dr. Kendrell was bending over me, doing things to my scalp. Stark stood behind him; Fleet and his cigar were near the dresser.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Five after two," Dr. Kendrell said. "Why should you be interested? You're not going anywhere till tomorrow at the earliest."

FLEET came forward from the dresser. He looked as grim as a fat-faced man can look. "Did you see who did it, Helm?"

"No. The killer was behind me."

"Killer, eh?" Fleet considered his cigar. "So you think it was our murderer?"

"Who then?"

Stark spoke up. For the first time since I'd known him he was really angry. "He was scared of Ben. That's why he laid for him."

Fleet approved of the notion. "The murderer was afraid you knew who he was."

"Nuts!" I said weakly. "There's no percentage in that for him. If I knew, chances were I'd told you."

"What other reason can there be for the attack?"

I closed my eyes. My throat was tired. I was tired all over. But my head didn't feel very bad. It had never hurt much, not even when the blow had descended. I'd been like a fighter knocked out without feeling pain.

Dr. Kendrell straightened up. "Well, that'll hold you for a while." He beamed at Stark. "I wish you'd catch your murderer, Val. His handiwork is taking up too much of my time."

I reflected that I'd never met anybody who had a more depressing effect on me than that hearty doctor. I lay with my eyes shut.

After a long silence Fleet complained: "But it doesn't make sense that he'd come here of all places to murder you. It was the rarest coincidence that the two old women were out."

I opened my eyes. Dr. Kendrell was gone. Stark had shifted his position to the foot of the bed.

"The preliminary idea wasn't to let me have it here," I said. "Maybe only to have a talk with me. Maybe to lure me away where I could be murdered in leisure and security. But there was Miss Hoopes' note on the table. Did you see it?"

Both Fleet and Stark nodded.

"It was practically an announcement that it was safe to knock me off," I went on. "It told that I would be home for lunch at any minute and that we wouldn't be disturbed. The killer snatched up the fire tongs and waited by the window. I could be seen walking up to the house. The killer waited beside the door, and when I came in stepped behind me and let me have it."

Stark frowned at the scene I'd constructed. "So why didn't he kill you, Ben? I mean, why didn't he keep beating you on the head till you was dead?"

"You heard what Dr. Kendrell said," I told him. "It was a low, glancing blow. It knocked me off my feet, but it didn't quite knock me out cold. I got up on one knee and waved an arm. Probably I looked as if I had a lot more strength left in me than I did. The killer got panicky and dropped the tongs and beat it."

Fleet said: "We'll have those tongs gone

over for fingerprints. He certainly didn't have time to wipe them."

"That rough castiron will never hold a print," I said.

"My God," Fleet said, "what does hold fingerprints?"

"Fingerprint cards," I said and closed my eyes.

I wished they'd go away and let me sleep. And right on top of that thought I fell asleep.

I WOKE up hungry. I was alone with Stark who was occupying the one chair in the room.

"Ken said he'd come back later," he said when he saw that I was awake. "I'll stay with you till Mrs. Ebling and her sister get home. They'll take care of you all right. Guess I could call them up at Emma Wandersen's, but it's past four and they'll be back any minute. You want anything, Ben?"

I said that I could use some of the coffee he'd find on the kitchen stove. He returned with a steaming cup of it and buttered toast, and he propped me up with a couple of pillows behind my back. I didn't feel like an invalid. I ate what there was to eat and wondered if I should ask him to heat and serve the lamb curry.

"You want me to help you put on you pajamas?" he suggested tenderly.

I was dressed except for shoes, shirt, jacket. My shirt and jacket had been tossed into a corner of the room by whoever had taken them off me; there was probably blood on them.

I said, "I'm going to dress," and got off the bed.

"Hey!" Stark protested. "You can't!"

"Sure I can." I walked the length of the room and back. There was a wobble in my knees, but otherwise I'd felt worse on occasions when I'd been up and around.

Stark watched me silently while I got into a fresh shirt and my other suit. I was knotting my necktie before he asked: "Something you got to do in a hurry, Ben?"

"The sooner the better."

He wet his lips. "The murderer?"

"Uh-huh."

My hat was where I'd dropped it in the living room. As I picked it up, I saw blood on the green rug, splatterings where I'd been struck and a trail of drops to the table. My landladies wouldn't like it.

"Can't you tell me who?" Stark's high-

pitched voice made him whine his question.

"Wait a bit," I said. "I haven't completely convinced myself."

MY HAT wouldn't fit properly because of the elaborate bandage Dr. Kendrell had wound around my head. I pulled the hat forward and down over my eyes, which made me look comic or sinister or both. At the door I decided to abandon it and went hatless out to the car with Stark.

His eyebrows arched when I told him where to drive. "Don't you think, Ben, we should take Ken Fleet?"

"No. This will be a very delicate operation. He might bungle it by horning in at the wrong moment."

When we pulled up in front of the house, I was glad that I hadn't attempted the lamb curry. It wouldn't have rested easily on my stomach. I always got queazy inside at the pay-off, and this one would be the most unpleasant in my experience.

Before I could push the bell-button, George Atwood answered the door. He must have seen us coming up to the house. Maybe he had been standing at a window, watching for me, waiting for me. His cheeks were pasty skin hanging loosely on fleshless bones. His eyes were those of a man slowly and sorrowfully dying, and they were fixed on my bandaged head.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Atwood," I said, calling up my best manners.

He found part of his voice. "Come in." He led us into the living room.

Beverly was rising from the couch. In a blue knitted dress she looked rather good in a lush, cozy way.

"Ben," she said and stopped, staring at my head. "What happened to you?"

"Somebody tried to murder me a couple of hours ago," I told her conversationally. "I was luckier than your three boy friends."

"Oh, no!" Her hands flew up to her mouth.

I dug out my pipe and tossed a grin at George Atwood. "The men she falls for die. Maybe she doesn't care for me, but the fact is she went through the motions."

Atwood said hollowly: "You're absurd."

"You're saying that because it's expected, but you know better," I said. "It's built up from corpse to corpse till there's no getting away from it. Beverly's affection is lethal."

Stark couldn't restrain himself. "Wait a minute, Ben. There's Dave Reese. He's

been her boy friend a long time and nothing happened to him. So maybe he's the one who's so jealous he—"

"Let's stop guessing games." I cut him off more sharply than I intended. "We're past that stage. David Reese no longer cares for Beverly. It's Rachel Townsend now. The attack on me came after I walked in on them kissing."

Beverly's unpainted mouth went sullen. "Good riddance! I never really cared for him."

"That's why he's still alive," I said.

I PUT a match to my pipe. They were very still, those two and the sheriff, and I let the tension hold. I had to be careful of every word, move, mood. And I had to keep feeling my way because I didn't really know. I only thought I knew.

"The fact is that I was attacked today because somebody believed that I was the newest addition to Beverly's collection," I said, not speaking to anybody in particular. "I can see only one reason why anybody should get that idea, and that was that last night I was in the orbor with Beverly. There were only three people beside myself who knew it—Beverly and her parents."

Atwood opened his mouth and closed it without sound. He seemed to realize that there was no point in saying *absurd* again. Beverly kept her gaze glued in a kind of horror to my bandaged head.

When nobody else cared to break the silence, I did. "The reason I wasn't killed was that the killer is considerably shorter than I. The blow came sideways instead of down and thereby lost much of its force. Fire tongs aren't as heavy and compact as a bean pot which practically does the lethal job by itself with its bone-crushing weight."

George Atwood glanced down at his short, slight body. When he looked up, there was a bitter twist to his tight, thin mouth.

He said: "Very well, Helm. I am prepared to confess."

Beverly uttered the kind of scream a terrified mouse would make. She wrapped her arms about herself and held on and locked her voice between clenched teeth.

And Stark, remembering that he represented the majesty of Cagula County law enforcement, started to recite words he must have read somewhere. "George Atwood, in the name of the law I hereby—"

Under my breath I cursed. Aloud I said: "Please let me, Sheriff." I jabbed my pipe at Atwood. "You say, Mr. Atwood, that you attacked me today?"

"I do say so." His voice rang out clearly, unafraid. His head was high, his gaze steady. "I also confess to murdering Frank Townsend." Again his lips twisted. "I assume that one murder will be sufficient to hang me."

"By the way, where did you attack me?" I asked.

"Where?"

"In the street? In the woods? Where?"

His eyes shifted to his daughter who was holding onto herself with her arms.

"Daddy!" she said brokenly. "Oh, Daddy!"

He brought his gaze back to me. "Do the details matter? It should be sufficient that I have confessed."

"One detail matters," I told him. "The fact is that it was a woman who conked me with the tongs. My hand touched her. Touched the loose cloth of a skirt. I don't think she's worth your gesture, Mr. Atwood, but I admire you for it."

ATWOOD kept looking at me. It struck me that he was afraid to look anywhere else, afraid that if he shifted his gaze it would light on his daughter.

"Not a woman scorned, either," I said to him. "Is that what you're thinking, Mr. Atwood, or do you know better than that too? Because, aside from everything else, if Beverly were out to knock off all the men who refused to remain in her collection, David Reese would have had priority over me as a victim."

"Daddy, what's he saying!" Her voice was a constricted half-sob. "I don't understand."

George Atwood's body sagged.

I was as physically weary as he looked. The sock on my head must have weakened me more than I'd thought. Later, after only a few more minutes now, I could have all the rest I wanted.

Because I knew that she was outside in the hall. I'd heard her there on the stairs. I'd heard feet scuffle and once a sharp drawing of breath—sounds so small that they would have been inaudible if I hadn't been listening for them.

I turned now and went out of the room and into the hall and to the foot of the stairs. She was already on the way up. I

saw the flashing of rather nice legs for a woman her age. I ran after her.

Downstairs in the living room Beverly screamed.

CHAPTER XXII

Kathryn Atwood

*Tuesday, May 20
4:52 P.M.*

THERE was no key in my door. I leaned against it, as if to hold back with my frail weight the tide of events in the guise of a policeman. Actually, I believe, I was simply catching my breath after my hurried ascent of the stairs. I had no desire to barricade myself in my room; such an act would be undignified as well as pointless.

Let him come to me here where I would not have to face any eyes but his.

He had been close behind me, but for the space of a dozen heartbeats I did not hear him in the hall. A terrifying stillness had gripped the house. Then downstairs Beverly spoke—spoke so stridently that it was like another shriek. She was coming up the stairs.

Please don't let her come in here.

As if in reply to my unspoken entreaty, I heard the policeman's voice ring out. "Keep them downstairs, Sheriff. I'd rather handle this alone."

I turned from the door. Sunlight streamed in through the west window. I moved forward into its comforting warmth. My knitting bag lay on the rocker. I took up the knitting and moved into the direct path of the sun. I had completed the pull-over, but there was very little of the cardigan done. My fingers took up their accustomed task with the knitting needles.

He knocked at the door. My heart gave a startled leap, as if it had been held tight and was now released by the sound of knuckles on wood. He must be a very well-mannered policeman to knock on this particular door before entering.

"Come in," said I.

The door opened and closed. Ben Helm looked at me sitting in the rocker, and then he took a step backward and put his shoulder-blades against the door. It was his bandaged head, I thought, that made him look like such a very sick man. And it was that bandage that caused me to re-

live that terrible moment a few hours ago when I, staring down at his bleeding scalp, had felt his frantic hand touch my skirt.

I dipped my head to my knitting. The sun had lost its warmth.

"Were you jealous of them?" said Ben Helm. "Was that why you did it, Mrs. Atwood?" He was bringing a pipe up to his mouth.

"I do not permit smoking in my room."

"Sorry." He dropped the pipe into a pocket. "I suppose you kept tabs on Beverly through her diary. She left it all over the house."

"Beverly is not untidy. It was always in her top dresser drawer." I dropped a stitch. That was careless of me; I almost never dropped stitches. "It was my right," said I with considerable heat. "It is a Mother's right to know what her daughter does."

"Was it your right to murder them?"

I DROPPED another stitch; I had never before knitted so poorly. My inclination was to put the knitting aside, but I could not bear to leave my hands unoccupied.

"They were wicked men," I told him. "Beverly is essentially good, but weak, and they were taking advantage of her weakness, corrupting her. I begged this man Parker to let her alone. He laughed in my face and called her vile names."

"Was this the Sunday morning you shot him?"

"He brought it on himself." I rocked gently. "Everybody in town knows what he was—a corrupter of women."

"Uh-huh. So that Sunday morning you followed him to kill him."

Ben Helm leaned against the door as if for support. A man who had been struck only a few hours ago with a pair of fire tongs should be in bed. I tilted the rocker forward, leaning my body toward him. It was so important that I make him understand that I had not wanted to hurt him and the others.

"I certainly did not follow this Mike Parker. A cousin of mine had had a baby the day before in the Fort Hals hospital and I was driving out to visit her. I passed Parker as he walked along the highway with his shotgun under his arm. I realized that that was my opportunity to speak to him in private. Before I could attract his attention, he had stepped into the woods. I stopped the car and walked after him

up the path."

"Was that the only time and place you could have a talk with him?"

"I could scarcely call on him. It would be obvious to anybody who saw me with him that I could have nothing to do with such a creature except as he concerned my daughter. I must say this for Beverly; she always zealously protected her reputation, and I could do no less."

"All right, you caught up to Mike Parker in the woods."

"I pleaded with him not to take advantage of my daughter. His reply was to laugh in my face."

"How did you get your hands on his gun?"

"There was a wind and he required both hands to light a cigarette. He had placed his gun against a tree." My knitting needles were moving as if by themselves. I stared at them, fascinated by their flashing. My voice felt harsh in my throat, but I heard it quiet and controlled. "The thought to harm him hadn't occurred to me. I don't know what came over me as I stood there listening to that evil man laugh so wickedly and asking me to do him a favor and get my daughter off his neck, referring to her with unspeakable adjectives. Then all at once he was dead. Please understand. I do not remember snatching up his shotgun, although of course I must have. He was dead, and I found myself running back to my car on the road."

"And I suppose you don't remember shoving the shotgun under his body after you killed him?" said the policeman with a hint of a sneer.

"I am sure I did no such thing."

"Then how did the gun get under his body?"

"Was it under him?"

HE SIGHED. "All right, you dropped the gun an instant after you shot, and he fell on it. What did you do then—calmly proceed to visit your cousin in the hospital?"

"I drove to Fort Hals, but only because I considered it advisable to continue to my destination. Do not imagine that I wasn't disturbed."

"Disturbed, Mrs. Atwood? You had murdered a man and you were merely disturbed?"

I glanced up at him in distaste. "Would you prefer a stronger word? The lewd

creature had brought his death on himself." I regretted that I was the direct cause of it, but I am not an emotional person. Except—" I hesitated, faltering; I fumbled in my mind to collect my thoughts.

"Except when you kill," said Ben Helm brutally.

"Something came over me," I murmured. "I do not remember."

The last row of my knitting had gone very badly. I should have ripped it, but it did not seem worth the effort. I continued to knit.

He was speaking. I had missed something of what he was saying.

"... wasn't trying to corrupt your daughter, as you put it. If anything in that case it was the other way around."

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Rudolph Matterson," said he. "He was trying to resist her. What could you have had against him?"

It was so simple, and the policeman insisted on making it complicated. "Beverly's curse was her weakness. If only the men had let her alone, she would have married David Reese, who is a fine, upright man, and settled down. I read Beverly's diary and what she wrote about Rudolph Matterson. I know men. They are vile creatures, all of them. It was obvious to me that he was toying with Beverly, rousing her desire by pretending that he was restraining himself. There is no more subtly effective way to make a woman succumb than through that particular technique. And he kissed her on the terrace, didn't he?"

"My God!" He stared at me. "You know that she had made him kiss her. You knew that after that he'd made no attempt to get in touch with her. And yet four days later you killed him."

ODDLY, my fingers refused to function properly. I placed the knitting on my lap and folded my hands on top of it.

"It was a mistake," I admitted. "Last Tuesday evening Beverly left the house rather late; it was considerably after nine. I was afraid that she was bound for Rudolph's studio. I followed her, and several blocks beyond Rudolph's place I saw her enter his car."

"But Frank Townsend was in it."

"I did not see who was in the car. I had not yet read the entry in the diary that she

had written that day saying that she had a possible appointment that evening with Frank Townsend. I assumed that because it was Rudolph's car, Rudolph was in it, and it seemed clear to me that after what had occurred between them he would meet her for only one purpose. After all, his reputation was at least as bad as Parker's. I returned to the house and went up to my room, but I was disturbed. I was her mother. It was my duty to go to Rudolph and ask him to let her alone."

"Didn't it ever occur to you to ask her to let the men alone?"

The sinking sun was withdrawing its warmth from the room. My body contracted with a sudden chill.

"The relations between mother and daughter are difficult for a man to understand, Mr. Helm. We are ostensibly intimate, yet there is a barrier between us where men are concerned. Beverly was particularly difficult. She was inclined to evade my questions or to lie when direct answers were required. What was I to do—confront her with the facts I had learned from her diary? And would it have been of any use? No, she would have gone her own way no matter what I had said to her."

His eyes, regarding me steadily, were very grave. "All right, so at ten o'clock that night you went to see Matterson. But if you are sure he was with Beverly, he would certainly be out at that time?"

"I could wait for his return. When I was on his terrace, I was surprised to see him in the living room. I tapped on the window. He admitted me and greeted me cordially. He told me that he was preparing tea for himself in the kitchen and invited me to join him. He wanted to serve the tea in the dining room, but it was not a time to stand on ceremony. I could tell him as easily what I had come to say across the kitchen table.

I paused. My clasped hands tightened achingly.

"And like Mike Parker, he laughed at you when you asked him to let Beverly alone."

"He was not as crude, but his manner was similar."

"In short, Mrs. Atwood, he told you the truth, which you knew was the truth because you had read the diary."

How I detested that creature leaning his bandaged head against the door!

"You men may call it the truth, but for every weak woman there is a horde of wicked men anxious to take advantage of her. At the least, I had expected Rudolph to be sympathetic to a mother's plea. I cannot recall what he said, but I could not endure his smug, superior attitude."

MY VOICE was unbelievably shrill. It was only in recent weeks that I had experienced these periods of agitation.

"And so you snatched up the bean pot and brought it down on his head," he uttered the blunt words. "You were not so—uh—disturbed that you neglected to wipe the cup and saucer."

"It was a thought that occurred to me as I was about to leave." I had been rocking gently, and that somehow restored my self-possession. "I have read detective stories; I was aware of the possibility of tell-tale fingerprints."

"Did your husband see you leave the house?"

"George? As far as I know, he didn't. But I had a dreadful experience when I had almost reached the street. A car turned into the driveway. I crouched against the hedge, out of sight of the driver."

He nodded. "Frank Townsend coming home. Your husband must have gone to the studio while you were in the kitchen with Matterson, and he returned after you'd you'd left."

"George in the studio? I know that he said he came to visit Rudolph at about that time and changed his mind before he reached the house. But what on earth could he have been doing in the studio?"

He made no reply to my question. He spoke as if to himself. "Maybe he didn't know. He thought it might be Beverly, or maybe he finally saw it the same way I did."

Downstairs somebody was weeping—weeping so softly that I had not been aware of it before this. It was Beverly, of course. My poor daughter! Who would sew and knit for her now and buy her beautiful things? Who would protect her from herself? And poor, floundering, inadequate George! He would be lost without me to keep a well-ordered home for him. About myself I no longer cared. It was too late now for anything but to make them all understand that I had not wanted to do these things.

The policeman was speaking. "But where

Frank Townsend was concerned, there was no hidden outburst of emotion. You didn't even go through the motions of pleading with him first. That was cold-blooded, premeditated murder. Though I suppose that after the first couple it became easier."

I picked up my knitting from my lap, but my fingers remained motionless. "He was destroying my daughter—he more than any of the others. I do not know how it is that a man can have such a hold over a woman, in particular a crude creature like Frank Townsend. I feared that she would run off with him, or that if she did marry David, Frank Townsend would continue to be an obstacle to her happiness. I had thought that it was over between them, but Saturday evening she was in the arbor with him. I realized then that she would never be free of him while he lived."

"Uh-huh. Murder becomes the solution to all problems."

I sought for a retort, but there was a blur in my brain. I started to knit. My fingers were astonishingly clumsy.

"And in order to get rid of him," said he, "you were willing to kill anybody who happened to drink from that bottle."

For a policeman, he was not very acute. I gave him a somewhat superior smile.

"I am sure you are aware of the habits of drunkards. I expected to find a bottle of whiskey in his house, and I did. No, there was little risk that anybody else would drink the whiskey when there was a drunkard in the house. Besides, he lived alone with his sister."

HE STARED at me so gravely and so steadily and so long that I felt a prickling sensation on my skin.

"May I know what in particular about me holds your attention?" I demanded.

"I'm trying to convince myself that your complacency is real," was his response.

"I am not an excitable person, if that is what you wish to know."

"Not even when you kill." There was a reflective quality in his tone. "Not even then." He took his pipe from his pocket, but made no attempt to light it. He did not even bring it up to his mouth. "All right, murder became a habit. But why me, Mrs. Atwood? Simply because Beverly had taken me to the arbor for a few minutes last night?"

At least I could look him straight in the eye; I could hurl my contempt at him.

"You were the worst of them, Mr. Helm. I must say for the others that they had not been married, but you have a wife." He opened his mouth as if to protest; I cut him off. "You're all the same, you men. No sooner did you come to Rexton than you started to carry on with that Rachel Townsend. Don't try to deny it; Dorothy Ebling told me. Your wife wasn't enough for you and that harlot Rachel wasn't enough for you. You needed my daughter also."

No, I wasn't excitable by nature, but now I found myself a-tremble with the violence of my outburst. I paused to regain control over myself.

He uttered no word in his defense. He stood with his pipe in his hand and his face almost as pale as the bandage around his head, and he appeared to be waiting for me to go on.

When I spoke again, my tone was listless. "This noon I went to call on you to plead with you to let my daughter alone. I found the note from Margaret Hoopes on the table and then I saw you come to the house. I did not intend to kill you when I snatched up the fire tongs. Hurt you a little, yes, to punish you, but not to kill you."

"You would have struck me again and finished me off if I hadn't started to turn and scare you off."

I didn't know. I could not clearly remember the moment. All I could remember was a fury I had not known in my life until recent weeks.

"Does it matter?" With an effort of will, I was compelling myself to knit. "You saw me as I left the house, and you came here."

"I didn't see you, Mrs. Atwood."

"But you knew that I . . ."

He shook his head. "I was pretty sure you were the killer, but not as sure as a cop must be. Not positive till you confessed a few minutes ago."

I ROCKED in my chair. There was no tumult in me. I was only very, very tired.

"So it was unnecessary," I murmured. "I had only to keep my mouth closed."

"Maybe."

I discarded the knitting and clasped my hands. I felt quite sad.

"It is better this way," I told him quietly. "I am a somewhat placid woman, Mr. Helm, but it was not easy living more lives than one. I have already died several

deaths. One more will not matter."

He blinked once and then the corners of his thin mouth lifted. "Uh-huh. Snooping, of course. You were on the stairs last night when your husband and I read the diary and you heard us talk about *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. You were used to snooping, Mrs. Atwood—reading Beverly's diary, following her when she went out on dates, no doubt listening in on everything that went on."

"It is my duty to know what is happening in my household."

He put his pipe into his mouth, sucked on it as if it were a candy stick, then removed it.

"Tell me," asked the policeman, "do you believe what you told me?"

I gave him a scornful smile. "You do not believe my confession, Mr. Helm?"

"That you murdered them? I have no doubt that you did. But why you did is something else. I don't think that you know why yourself."

The policeman had a definitely irritating manner. "I believe I made clear that I was protecting my daughter from the men who were taking advantage of my daughter."

"And that you'd keep murdering until she finally settled down as David Reese's wife, and after that too if necessary?"

How could I reply to what was hazy and obscure?

"No, Mrs. Atwood," he was saying. "That's too much on the surface for mass murder. Too irrationally rational. I think that the real reason was that you were jealous of your daughter."

I did not know why his absurd words should drive terror into my hear. My hands clasped fiercely, as if holding a priceless possession they must not relinquish.

"I remember now that you said something like that when you came in. Jealous!" I heard myself laugh. "Of what, pray, would I be jealous?"

"Of your daughter," said the policeman solemnly. "Of her way with men. Of the men themselves."

My laughter was like a wall shielding me from him. I laughed and I spoke.

"Is that supposed to be Freudian?"

"Good stuff, Freud. Homicide cops ought to study him. You didn't live a normal life, Mrs. Atwood. You married a man you didn't care for. You drew yourself into yourself, into a room of your own, into a shell of your own. As Beverly put

it in her diary, you were remote from the world. But a woman can't simply resign from the world and remain normal and healthy in her mind. You came to hate your daughter of a loveless, frustrated marriage."

"Hate her!" I rose to my feet, screaming at him. "She was all I had. I slaved for her, sewed for her, worshipped her, lived for her."

"And your subconscious hated her. She was very much like you and she was living the life denied to you. Protect her? From Frank Townsend who could be trusted with any woman anywhere? From Rudolph Matterson who was trying his best to ward her off? From me who had hardly known her? Only Mike Parker fits in, and he was trying to drop her. You were killing her again and again through the men she cared for."

"No!" The word passed my lips calmly. I had screamed for perhaps the first time in my adult life; I had been disturbed as never before. Now, like a blanket whisking over me, a sense of placidity returned.

"So you went to plead with Parker and Matterson and me to let her alone?" continued the policeman remorselessly. "You ended up by killing two of them and trying to kill me. Whether or not your conscious mind knew it, you had intended to murder from the beginning. As for Frank Townsend, you didn't even rationalize his murder by pretending to talk to him. His death was carefully arranged beforehand because he was the man Beverly loved most."

"You lie, Mr. Helm."

MY KNITTING had fallen to the floor with my rising from the chair. I stooped for it and placed it on the dresser and returned to the rocker, where I sat facing him. I spoke quietly enough. "The proof that you lie was my attitude toward David Reese. I wished her to marry him."

"Because her diary made it clear that she cared for him less than for the others. She held onto him only because he was the best bet as a husband. If she had married him, you would have seen to it that it wouldn't have lasted. You would have killed him in another way, by making him miserable."

"You lie, Mr. Helm."

He could not touch me with his lies. He could not make me die more deaths than I had already died, except the ultimate death which would be like falling asleep

after a wearying day. Let his lies go on. I was invulnerable to them.

He did not speak. I lifted my gaze from my clasped hands. His back was to me; he was opening the door.

He stepped out into the hall. One of his hands remained in the room, on the door-jamb.

"Sheriff, come and get your prisoner," he called.

I rose to my feet. My legs were unsteady; I put out a hand to cling to the edge of the dresser.

"You lie, Mr. Helm!" I shouted at him.

CHAPTER XXIII

David Reese

Thursday, May 22
2:20 P.M.

WHEN I returned to the office, Rachel was on the phone. She blew me a kiss with one finger as she said into the mouthpiece: "I know, Mr. Ettinger, but—" Which was as far as Mr. Ettinger ever let anybody get with a sentence.

I tossed my hat on a filing cabinet, sat down at my desk, waited. Mr. Ettinger had sold his house through me and was annoyed because the title search was delaying the closing. Phoned every day to explain his annoyance in endless detail.

Rachel turned slightly in her chair as she listened to Mr. Ettinger's cackling. From where I sat I had a fine view of her profile. That was her best feature except her eyes. The only thing I wanted to do more than look at her was be closer to her.

I picked up a pencil and ran it through my fingers. The Williams house in Cook Valley was for sale. Too large for us at present, but in time we could use that west wing for a nursery and later the upstairs room with the dormers for the oldest child's room and the—

"Well, darling?"

She'd got rid of Mr. Ettinger. She'd turned to face me, her dark eyes grave now.

I tumbled off the cloud. Down to the depressing reality of thirty minutes ago.

I said: "Beverly and her father were packing when I got there. They're driving to Boston to stay with his brother for a while. Mr. Atwood got a leave of absence from the school for the rest of the term. I was glad you made me go to see them.

Seems they've been mostly alone these two days."

"How are they taking it?"

I bounced the pencil on the desk blotter. "Beverly is in a pretty bad state. Blames herself for what her mother did. I guess it is her fault in a way. She was clinging to her father all the time I was there."

"She has nobody else," Rachel said.

"It's more than that. Once she'd told me that her father didn't like her. When I was there today, I got a feeling that there was a deep understanding between them. And Mr. Atwood said something when I was leaving. I told him how sorry I was. He said: 'Yes, for those men who died and for Kathryn and for Beverly. But don't be sorry for me, David. I've found a daughter.' I don't know why that should have embarrassed me, but it did."

RACHEL looked toward the street. "I suppose they'll come back for the trial."

"If there is a trial," I said. "On the way back I stopped off to see Joe Rubenstein. He'd agreed to handle the defense. He said that if a man had done all that, or if there'd been only one victim, he would have a tough job. But Mrs. Atwood is such a sweet, respectable, middle-aged woman that no jury will believe she was sane."

We were silent for a while. I was wondering about insanity. It was a legal term. Psychiatrists had a different way of putting it.

"Ben Helm was here," Rachel said. "He came to say good-bye. He's flying to the west coast to see his wife."

I went to her desk and stood at the side of her chair. Looked down at her. "I'm grateful to the sleuth," I said. "If he hadn't broken the case, you would've gone through life wondering if I was a murderer."

"Dave, don't ever say that again!"

"Sure, you would've loved me and believed in me as much as you could, but there would've been a core of doubt. That's what murder does to innocent bystanders. Beverly suspected her father and for a while you suspected your brother and I—"

"Please, Dave, let's not talk about it."

Her face was turned up to me. I put an arm about her shoulders and dipped my mouth to hers.

"Not here, darling," she protested. "People can see from the street."

"Let them see," I said.



Even as the dog ate the food that had been provided for him, an air of disaster loomed menacingly . . .

Hair of the Dog

by Leonard Finley Hilts

A dog, they say, is man's best friend. He will trust a man he likes, and in return he expects fair treatment. But some men are not to be trusted, and a dog will know them

VIRGINIA CRAMER paced the hotel room like a caged animal.

Her face was as pale as alabaster, making her lips a gory slash and her bleached hair tinny and cheap. Her eyes flicked nervously from object to object, while a cigarette burned itself out between her fingers.

Her husband, Jeff, slouched in a soft chair, one leg thrown over the arm in careless fashion, and watched her, grinning.

"What the hell are you so worried about?" he demanded amiably after some minutes of watching. "I told you before there was nothing to be scared of."

Virginia whirled to face him. "Nothing to be scared of! Why, you imbecile! Doesn't the electric chair scare you?"

Jeff's grin spread into a laugh. "Who's going to the hot seat?" he asked. "I'm not. But you will if you run around looking like *that*. The first rookie cop that spots you'll know you're guilty of something."

She threw a contemptuous look at him and dropped to the bed.

"Listen, Ginny," Jeff said, "how many times do I have to tell you that the stuff I put in that beer is okay. The guy that gave it to me says it's impossible to tell the effects from a natural heart attack, especially in an old man. We won't be suspected because they won't suspect murder at all."

She shivered at the mention of the word murder. "I don't like it," she said in a cold voice tinged with fear. "I don't like anything about death. You've gone too far this time, Jeff."

"Aw nuts!"

"And this waiting . . ." Her voice jumped a notch higher and took on a sharper edge.

"Stop it!" Jeff snapped at her. "You've always wanted money so you could have all the things you've

dreamed of. And here's our chance to get it. The best chance we'll ever have. I inherit Uncle Rod's entire estate, and that's a cool million bucks."

Ginny watched him talk and her eyes narrowed. "The song is familiar," she said finally. "Every one of your deals is always going to net you a cool something or other. It's been that way for seven years now, and every time we have to pack up and get out fast, leaving an unpaid hotel bill and a big stink behind us."

Jeff got out of the chair and started pacing in the same path his wife had just left. "Aw, that was all small stuff," he growled.

Color began to flow into Ginny's face as anger replaced the fear. "Sure it was small stuff. Nothing like murder and a million bucks. Only petty swindling, bad checks and stuff like that. But you were no good at it, even though it *was* small stuff. How do you expect to get away with something like this?"

Jeff jammed his hands deep into the pants pocket of his suit and said, "Oh, shut up!" He continued to parade up and down the room, deep in thought. He had black, wavy hair, an angular face and cold gray eyes. The suit was a dark blue chalk stripe, but the stripes were too heavy, making it look more like a barker's special than the banker's neat job he intended. Tan shoes and a robin's egg blue tie finished off the picture.

GINNY sat on the edge of the bed, studying her fingernails. Her face showed a mixture of emotions, ranging from the dark brooding of anger to the pale lip-licking of fear. Occasionally she glanced up at her husband.

"How long will it be, Jeff?" she asked finally.

He shrugged. "How do I know? How often does Uncle Rod drink beer?

I only spiked one bottle, and I gave him a whole case. It's only been two days so far. It might happen today and it might be two weeks yet."

"Oh God!" Ginny said. Suddenly she plunged her face into her hands and began sobbing.

Jeff looked at her distastefully. "Will you stop that! It's bad enough waiting, without having sound effects from you."

Ginny kept her hands across her face but made the sobs noiseless. Jeff, now with a black scowl on his face, continued walking back and forth across the room. His eyes followed the pattern in the rug. A strained silence settled on the room.

It was broken by the harsh jingle of the telephone. Both of them jumped at the sound. Jeff moved toward the phone in a hurry, while Ginny stiffened up, her face going white once more.

"Hello. Yes, this is Jeff Cramer. Oh, hello, Beemis." Jeff's tone was smooth and unworried. When he recognized the voice of his uncle's butler on the other end of the line he became positively cordial. "And how is Uncle Rod today?"

There was a silence in the room, interrupted only by the scratchy sound of Beemis' voice. Ginny strained, but could not understand what he was saying.

"No!" Jeff exploded in amazement. "Why, that's too bad!"

Beemis said a few more words and Jeff answered, "Why certainly. I'll be right over."

He put the phone back on the cradle and turned around to Ginny. Suddenly he started laughing uncontrollably. He laughed so hard that he couldn't talk or stand up. He staggered to the soft chair and collapsed into it. Ginny stared at him, startled by his mirth.

"Jeff! What is it?" she demanded. "What are you laughing at?"

Between gasps of laughter Jeff managed to say, "Uncle Rod's dog, Blackwell, drinks beer too." Then he went off again.

For a moment Ginny was puzzled, then a possible meaning to Jeff's words came to her. "You mean," she asked, "that the dog drank the spiked bottle?"

Jeff nodded. "That's it. He died of a heart attack this morning. Beemis says that Uncle Rod is very badly shaken. He's been in ill health for some time, and this thing caused a relapse. He had to go back to bed, and have the doctor in."

Ginny didn't laugh, but now she suddenly felt a wave of relief flow over her, like a hot shower on a cold morning.

"Uncle Rod asked Beemis to call me," Jeff went on. His face was straight now. "Says he'd like to have a talk with me."

Ginny became alarmed again. "Does he suspect?" she asked quickly. "Maybe you'd better not go."

Jeff shook his head. "Uh-uh. I think he's feeling sicker this time than he ever has before. He loved that dog an awful lot. More by a damn' sight than he loves me. But he wants to talk to me before something serious happens."

Ginny relaxed again. Jeff got his overcoat and hat from the closet and prepared to leave. He stopped to give her a fleeting kiss and started for the door. With his hand on the knob he turned around.

"You know, Ginny," he said with a little smirk, "if grief over the loss of his favorite dog should bring an early end to Uncle Rod, this will be one of the first indirect murders ever committed."

Ginny shivered again as he closed the

"The Strange Middle World"

...BEHIND YOUR CONSCIOUS MIND

YOU—your *conscious* self, is suspended between two worlds! There is the world of every day—of colors, sounds and substances. There is also the world of the universes—of moons, stars, and distant nebulae.

But has your mind ever been suddenly filled with the light of other realities—ideas which, although stimulating and informative, were strangely *new* and *different*? Have you had mental pictures of events that your mortal eyes have never seen? Do you feel at times as though an *intelligence* was striving to guide you? Have you found yourself listening to words of *inner* direction?

Behind your thinking mind lies a great *middle world*—the world of the subconscious. It is poised between the world of everyday existence and the great *intelligence* of the universe. It is this *middle world* which translates the subtle Cosmic forces which pervade your being, into the urges of self and into *intuitive impressions*. Do you want to know why you act as you do? Would you like to have access to the source of those talents and abilities which make for the mastery of life? Learn how to *explore* this middle world.

Accept This Free Book

The Rosicrucians (not a religion) are a world-wide fraternity of thinking, *inquiring* men and women. They have united their existence—they have brought together the physical world and the world of self into a *harmonious*, livable whole. They have learned to conquer fears and substitute knowledge for the so-called *mysteries* of life. Use the coupon below for a *free* copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how you, too, may share this unique wisdom.

The ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose (AMORC) California

SCRIBE: W.W.E., Rosicrucian Order, AMORC
San Jose, California

Gentlemen: I am interested in exploring the middle world of my mind. Please send me the *free* book, "The Mastery of Life."

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____



door and went down the hall.

BEEMIS met Jeff at the front door of the old Cramer mansion and escorted him through the long lower hall, and up to his uncle's bed room on the second floor.

"He took Blackwell's loss pretty seriously, huh, Beemis?" Jeff said as they walked.

Beemis nodded. "Yes sir, he did. He was fond of the dog. But it wasn't only that. He's been ailing for a year and wouldn't go to bed, or even admit it to anyone. It took this shock to do it."

The butler left him at an ornate door and Jeff tapped lightly with his knuckles. He went in when he heard Rodney Cramer's muffled voice on the other side.

The old man was lying in bed, looking pale and drawn. He seemed to have lost weight since Jeff had seen him last. His skin looked more dried up now, wrinkled like an old piece of parchment. He looked ten years older, although it had only been two days since Jeff's last visit.

"Hello, Uncle Rod," Jeff said cheerfully as he shook the wrinkled hand and pulled up a chair beside the bed. "Beemis told me about Blackwell over the phone."

Rodney Cramer didn't look pleased. His answer to his nephew's cheerful greeting was a non-committal grunt. It took a moment for the chill in the air to communicate itself to Jeff, who saw then that his uncle's eyes hadn't changed. The rest of him had deteriorated, but the eyes were still fiery.

In the face of his uncle's bad humor, Jeff didn't try to start a conversation. He waited for the old man to speak the first words.

Rodney studied Jeff for a minute with sunken brooding eyes. He noted

with evident displeasure the loud tie and the rakish pattern of his suit. He missed nothing in his appraisal, not even the puffy little pouches under Jeff's eyes.

Finally he said, "Jeffry, you're no good. There isn't an honest bone in your body. And that wife of yours is very little better."

Jeff sat up a little straighter and a red flush crept up the back of his neck. He started to say something in defense, but he bit off the words before they passed his lips.

"I held out hopes," the old man continued in the same bitter tone, "that someday you'd get rid of that wild streak you inherited from my brother. That maybe you'd settle down. For the past few years I've been hearing stories about you, and I kept saying to myself that you'd get over it. My will was made out to you, and I left it that way because of my hopes."

Jeff laughed self consciously. "Oh hell, Uncle Rod, everybody has to sow a few wild oats. I'll bet you did plenty of it when you were young. One of these days I'll—"

"Nonsense," the old man barked. "I've come to realize the kind of stuff of which you're made and I know now you won't change."

He hoisted himself on to his elbows and cold anger rushed into his eyes. "Let me tell you, Jeffry," he snapped, "that you haven't fooled me one bit. I know what happened to Blackwell and I know you intended it for me. You tried to kill me! Oh, I couldn't prove it. You were smart enough to use some kind of a poison that couldn't be traced. But nevertheless, *I know you tried.*" He shook a crooked finger in Jeff's face. "And any man who would try to commit murder, especially for money, is too far gone ever to change."

JEFF'S body snapped straight in his chair under this direct attack and the weak smile he had preserved through the earlier part of his uncle's speech faded into a guilty stare. His mouth opened to offer an automatic denial.

"Never mind denying it!" the old man cut in. "I know it, and that's all there is to it. I called you over here today because of that, and because now I know I haven't long to live. The doctor said this morning that it will be a few months, all of them in bed. *And before I die, Jeffry, I want to see you punished.*"

Jeff jumped from his chair and stared around the room. There was no one else to hear his uncle's words but the thought had scared him. Still shaking, he turned back toward the bed.

"Wha—what do you mean—punished?"

"Sit down until I'm finished," Cramer ordered. There was crisp authority in his voice and Jeff reacted automatically.

"As far as I'm concerned," he said, "you're guilty of murder. You and that bleached blonde of yours. You intended to murder me, and the fact that I'm still alive doesn't change things one bit. That was just my luck. I believe that the guilt in any crime is in the intention. The act itself is secondary. To me you are a murderer."

"Just a minute, Uncle Rod," Jeff protested. He was trying desperately to pull himself together. "You said a while ago that you can't prove anything."

"Can't prove it? No, I can't. And I don't have to. Jeffry, I'm going to punish you through your own weakness. I won't have to prove a thing. You'll do that *for me.*"

The old man's line of reasoning was beyond Jeff. He didn't understand what he was driving at. It seemed

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING— (OR IS IT?)



By
**GROUCHO
MARK**

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

Obviously the best way is by continuing to buy U. S. Savings Bonds—through the Payroll Plan.

They're safe and sound. Old Uncle Sam *personally* guarantees your investment. And he never fobbed off a bum I.O.U. on *anybody*.

You get four bucks back for every three you put in.

So stick with the Payroll Plan, son—and you can't lose.

So—all seriousness aside—you'd better keep on saving, pal.

**SAVE THE EASY WAY...BUY YOUR BONDS
THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS**

IN THE JUNE ISSUE OF
MAMMOTH MYSTERY
 A BRAND-NEW, 80,000-WORD NOVEL
MORE DEATHS THAN ONE

BY
BRUNO FISCHER

WHO WROTE SUCH BEST-SELLING MYSTERY NOVELS AS "THE PIGSKIN BAG," "THE SPIDER LILY," "QUOTH THE RAVEN," "SO MUCH BLOOD," "THE HORNETS' NEST," ETC.

ALSO EXCEPTIONAL SHORT STORIES

BY
ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

PAUL W. FAIRMAN

WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

H. B. HICKEY

LEONARD FINLEY HILTS

AT YOUR NEWSSTAND APRIL 18

This Easy Way
TEACHES GUITAR
 to Your Satisfaction in
 30 Days Or Money Back



Astounding new Jim Major Home Method teaches you to play guitar easily, quickly, without long hours practicing scales or exercises. *No musical knowledge necessary.* Play many popular songs, hymns in very short time. 30 lessons, complete course for only \$1.69. EXTRA — BIG 53 SONG BOOK included without additional cost. Send no money . . . pay postman \$1.69 plus postage. (Cash with order we pay postage.) Money back guarantee. Send today to Jim Major, Room 350-E, 230 East Ohio, Chicago 11, Ill.

LAW...

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. **More Ability: More Prestige: More Money** We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW, C. I. APPROVED. LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street, A Correspondence Institution Dept. L-412 Chicago 5, Ill.

101 WAYS TO BE YOUR OWN BOSS!

Terrific new book crammed with 101 small-capital opportunities. Many in little-known, PROFITABLE fields! Send \$1.25. We'll RUSH your copy postpaid, or we'll ship C.O.D., \$1.25 plus postage. AMERICAN SUCCESS AIDS Box 147 Bellmore, New York Write for FREE 1947 Opportunity Book Bulletin!

clear that Rodney wasn't going to turn him over to the police. What then?

Cramer settled back on the pillow once more and closed his eyes for a moment. He sighed gently once or twice and waited for some of his spent strength to return. Then he opened his eyes again. They were as fiery as ever.

"Jeffry, you're money mad. You won't work, but you'd do anything else, even murder, for money. I've heard of the cheating, chiseling life you've been leading and it was all because you wanted money but wouldn't work honestly for it. That's the biggest weakness in that weak character of yours, that terrible desire for money."

Jeff was breathing lightly, following the old man's words carefully. His intentions were still puzzling, but Jeff was past the first scare. Whatever his uncle had in mind, it didn't appear to be serious.

Cramer's face twisted momentarily as a twinge of pain pinched at his body. When he spoke again his voice was fainter, seeming to be an echo from somewhere deep in his chest.

"Money will be your ruination, Jeffry," he said heavily, "and because I think you should be punished for being guilty of murder by intention, I'm going to hasten your end. I've made a new will from which you are excluded entirely. There are a great many good causes who can use the bulk of my money usefully."

A LEAD weight dropped hard into the pit of Jeff's stomach. Excluded from the will! That meant no more chance of getting the old man's money. That was going to hurt, hurt worse than a real murder charge might. Jeff didn't say anything.

"But," Rodney went on, "just excluding you from the will isn't enough.

I'm going to deal out the worst punishment I know of. I'm going to give you twenty thousand dollars in cash."

"What!" Jeff almost fell from his chair.

The old man turned his eyes to Jeff. "Don't sound so elated," he snapped.

"Why, Uncle Rod, I think that's pretty nice of you. I should sound pretty happy, don't you think?"

"Nice!" Cramer's eyes blazed again. "Why, you young fool, twenty thousand dollars will hang you!"

"What a lovely way to die," Jeff said.

The old man looked at him with utter and complete disgust. From boyhood he had worked hard to make his money. He had worked not alone for the profits, but also for the pride of being a successful man. He had made the money, but it had always meant more to him to be pointed out as a successful, self-made man than as a millionaire.

Jeff's heart was pounding in his chest. Twenty thousand dollars! Punishment! He kept his face straight and sober, for fear that his uncle might change his mind. Punishment! What a joke!

Hell should be like this, he thought.

The traces of glee which Jeff couldn't hide made his eyes dance and tilted the corners of his mouth. Cramer saw it and felt nauseated. What a fool! He reached under his pillow, fumbled around for a moment, then brought out his fist, tightly clenched.

"All right, you idiot," he said in a raw voice, "here's your money. Take it and put it in your pocket immediately. And leave it there until you get back to your hotel."

Jeff's hand shot out eagerly and took the rolled wad of bills. He was tempted to count and to fondle the money after he had his fingers around it, but he resisted the impulse. Instead he jammed them into his coat pocket after the pressure of his hand released them.



SOLID STERLING SILVER
with 10k gold inlay.

COMES IN ATTRACTIVE GIFT BOX

THE IDEAL GIFT FOR HIM. ORDER TODAY.

Masculinity in a perfect combination of art and craftsmanship is this smart, luxurious and cosmopolitan silver and inlaid gold tie clasp. The design is unique, and will enhance the attractiveness and value of any tie.

SEND NO MONEY--Only your name and address, and pay postman only \$4.50 plus postage on delivery, or send \$4.50 by cash, check or money order, and we pay postage. Order today.

WESTERN ARTS

327 Drake Ave.,

San Antonio 4, Texas

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE

Borrow \$50 to \$300⁰⁰

Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow **BY MAIL** \$50.00 to \$300.00 this easy quick confidential way.

BY MAIL

IT IS EASY TO BORROW BY MAIL!

Completely confidential and private. Convenient Monthly Payments

NO ENDORSERS NEEDED EMPLOYED MEN and women of good character can solve their money problems quickly and in privacy with loans **MADE BY MAIL**. No endorsers or co-signers. We do not contact employers, friends or relatives. Convenient monthly payments. Send us your name and address and we will mail application blank and complete details **FREE** in plain envelope. There is no obligation.

STATE FINANCE CO.

303 Marine Bldg., Dept. J-84, New Orleans 12, La.

IF NATURE SLEEPS

You should take OSR Tablets. If you lack pep, energy, vitality and don't have natural desires for fun and good times, if you suffer from aches and pains, coated tongue or bad skin, it may be due to faulty elimination. **HELP NATURE with OSR Tablets**—nature's herbs in tablet form. **CAUTION:** Take only as shown by simple directions on the box. The **SAFE PRESCRIPTION TYPE** ingredients in OSR Tablets give quick, pleasant relief. Yes, you'll smile as you do your daily duty like a healthy man or woman. **SEND NO MONEY**—pay postman \$1.35 for a big box of 180 OSR Tablets. Or send \$1 NOW and SAVE 35¢. **HEALTH IS POWER—WRITE TODAY.** STANDARD REMEDY CO., Dept. Z-3, Baltimore 2, Maryland.

COMING!!

ANOTHER NEW AND COMPLETE NOVEL
FEATURING ONE OF DETECTIVE FICTION'S FAVORITE CHARACTERS

"JOHNNIE FLETCHER"

IN
THE WHISPERING MASTER

BY FRANK GRUBER

IN THE JULY ISSUE OF MAMMOTH DETECTIVE



SING-TALK thru your own Radio
with
Radio MICROPHONE




Put on your own broadcast at home with this Radio Mike. Sing. Talk from any room in the house. Make announcements. Lots of fun! It's wonderful voice practice. Easily attached to any radio. **SEND NO MONEY.** Pay postman \$1.98 plus postage. Send check or money order and save postage. No C.O.D.'s outside U.S.A.
ROLEY SALES CO., INC., Dept. EM-1, 15 Spruce St., New York 7, N. Y.


Learn **BAKING** *at home*

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Not seasonal, but year 'round good field for trained and experienced men. Thorough basic spare time home study course lays solid foundation. If you have the aptitude for this type of work, send for **FREE Booklet**, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking."

NATIONAL BAKING SCHOOL
1315 S. Michigan Ave., Dept. 1585 Chicago 5, Ill.



**LEARN HOW TO USE YOUR
HIDDEN POWER**



Draw things to you. Thousands have won over obstacles—Use the system that may lead to Power — Money — Love — Success. You get full information only 50¢ in coin or stamps, no C.O.D.

MIND MASTER 113 W. 57 St.
Dept. 908 N. Y. C. 19

High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go on rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-A-82 Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary.
DETECTIVE Particulars **FREE** Write to
GEO. Z. D. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

"Uncle Rod," Jeff stammered, "I really want to—"

"Shut up," Cramer snapped. "You'll live to curse the day you ever saw a dollar bill. Now hand me that glass of water and pour that medicine into it. Then get out of my sight. I never want to see you again."

Jeff jumped to his feet and quickly prepared his uncle's medicine.

"There you are, Uncle Rod," he said. "Now—"

"Now get out!" Cramer barked.

"All right."

Jeff picked up his hat, started for the door, then hesitated for a moment and looked back. Cramer was drinking the medicine, holding the glass in the sheet and pouring the liquid down fast, as if it tasted bad. Jeff started to thank him once again, then changed his mind and left.

Out in the street once again Jeff took a deep breath. "Oh, brother! The fate worse than death! Twenty thousand dollars! Wait till Ginny gets a load of this!"

WHEN Jeff opened the door to the hotel room Ginny was sitting in a lounging chair, smoking a cigarette. She had regained her outward composure now, but the ash tray beside her had ten lipstick-stained butts in it. Jeff grinned.

"Still nervous, honey?" he asked, flinging his hat toward the bed.

"Jeff!" Ginny cried, "What did he say? Did he know? Does he suspect?"

Jeff shrugged and began casually taking his overcoat off. "He told me that he isn't leaving me anything in his will," he said.

"He *does* know!"

Jeff nodded. "He does. And he has decided to punish me for even *trying* to kill him."

Ginny drew back, her face contorted

in fright.

Jeff jammed his hand into his suit pocket and pulled the bills out. He flung them into the air in one quick motion. They separated and came down like confetti, all over the room. For the first time he saw that he had been given twenty one-thousand dollar bills.

"Here's our punishment," he shouted. "This is what we get for trying to kill him. And believe me, according to him, it serves us right."

Ginny couldn't move for a minute. She stared from the money on the floor to her husband, then back to the bills again.

"Jeff, you stole it!" she gasped finally.

He roared with laughter. Leaving the money where it lay on the rug, he pulled Ginny over to the bed, threw her on it and kissed her soundly. Then he sat up and told her the whole story, word for word, just as it had happened.

"That's the damndest story I ever heard," she said when he had finished. "I think he's gone batty."

"Maybe so."

"It doesn't seem real."

"Don't those bills look real?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"But nothing, honey. We're being punished, so stand up and take it on the chin."

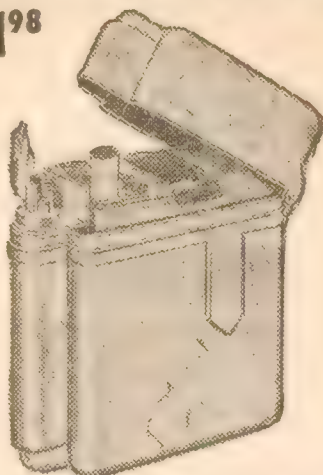
Jeff was jubilant. Ginny reassured herself with several glances at the bills lying around on the floor and then gradually became infected with his good spirits. Jeff stood up.

"Well," he said, "we can't let uncle down. Let's get on with the punishment. There's a new floor show at the Casa Manana that ought to send excruciating pains of torture through us. What d'you say, honey?"

Ginny was laughing by now. "Okay. But help me clean up this mess on the

INTRODUCTORY OFFER!

\$1.98



All-In-One Cigarette Lighter and Full-Pack Case gives you cigarettes and lights together as you want them. Streamlined, smart, modern . . . a wonderful convenience, the ideal gift. For men or women. Built for lifetime service of beautiful plastic. Deep-well lighter holds month's supply fluid. **SEND NO MONEY . . . 7 DAY TRIAL.** Order on trial. Inspection and approval. On arrival deposit \$1.98 plus C.O.D. Use 7 days. If not delighted return for full refund. (Send \$1.98 with order and we pay postage.) (Dealers . . . write for prices, discounts.)

HENRY SENNE & CO., Dept. 350-H
600 N. State St. Chicago 10, Ill.

Operator
No. 38



Follow This Man!

**Secret Service Operator
No. 38 is On The Job!**

Follow him through all the excitement of his chase after the counterfeit gang. See how a crafty operator solves a murder with tell-tale finger prints! Thrills! Mystery!

**FREE! The Confidential Reports
No. 38 Made to His Chief**
Earn a Regular Monthly Salary

Write for reports and free "Blue Book of Crime." Learn how YOU can become a Finger Print Expert, at home, in spare time, at small cost. 53% of all Identification

Bureaus in U. S. employ our students or graduates! Get list of all bureaus employing I. A. S. trained men. Write today! Literature sent only to persons stating age.

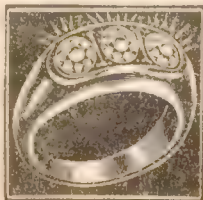
INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE

1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 492 A, Chicago 40, Illinois

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

Men and Women, 18 to 50

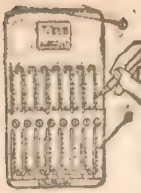
Many Swedish Massage graduates make \$50, \$75, or even more per week. Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32 page Illustrated Book FREE - Now! The College of Swedish Massage, Dept. 763-G, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11



WHY WEAR DIAMONDS

When diamond-dazzling Zircons from the mines of far-away mystic Siam are so effective and inexpensive! Thrilling heavy, hard-wearing, true backs, full of PINK! Exquisite mountings. See before you buy. Write for FREE catalog.

National Zircon Co., Dept. 36
Wheeling, W. Va. **Catalog FREE!**



POCKET ADDING MACHINE

Sturdy steel construction for lifetime use. Adds, subtracts, aids multiplication. Capacity 999, 999 99. A real machine—guaranteed 5 years. Thousands of satisfied users. Send name and address. We ship immediately. On delivery, pay postman \$2.50 (plus C.O.D. and postage charges). If you send \$2.50 with order, we pay postage. Leatherette case 25c additional. Your money back after 10 days' trial if not satisfied.

Free \$2.50 Trial

Send No Money

TAVELLA SALES CO.

Dept. 26, 25 W. Broadway, New York 7, N. Y.

SONGWRITERS POEMS WANTED AT ONCE

Send Your Poems, Any Subject, for Immediate Examination and FREE BOOK: "YOUR FUTURE IN SONGWRITING."

RADIO CITY MUSIC ACADEMY

1674 Broadway New York 19, N. Y.



DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed.

30 Years in Business

THE NEWELL COMPANY

284 Clayton St., St. Louis 5, Mo.

FREE BOOK

BOOKLETS

Each one of these booklets is POCKET SIZE, also contains 8 ILLUSTRATIONS, and is full of fun and entertainment. 12 of these joke booklets, ALL DIFFERENT, will be shipped prepaid upon receipt of \$1.00, cash or money order. No orders sent C.O.D. Print name and address and mail to:

Treasure Novelty Co., 72 Fifth Ave., Dept. 55-F, New York 11, N.Y.

THIS IS YOUR TEST!!!

Do you desire more abundant health? Do you feel that you are capable of securing greater income? Are you limited in your enjoyment of happiness? Do you earnestly desire to expand your capacities for receiving and holding? Read these words again, and only if you feel a distinct, impelling urge to do so, send your name and address to

THE "PRECEPTORS"

1817 N. Dewey St., Oklahoma City, Okla.



Send 25c for Handy Home Workshop Gunsmith Manual and Latest Ammunition and Guns Catalogue.

NEW YORK COMPANY, 10600-10710 West Ridgway Block Ridgway Pennsylvania

Ammunition
Shotgun Shells
Rifle Ammunition
Revolvers
Ammunition
New Shotguns
New Rifles



Magic White Dice

MISS OR PASS
Pair \$3.94, and \$5.50.
Red or Green Dice \$5.50, \$7.50 up

WHOLESALE

Dept. 5, Box 221,
Dallas 1, Texas



floor. I hate a dirty room, especially one littered with thousand dollar bills."

"HEY, Ginny! There's someone at the door and I'm shaving."

"I'm getting it," she called back.

Jeff scraped the razor through the lather on his face. It was a struggle for him to keep his face straight enough to shave without cutting himself. Twenty thousand dollars! No more skimping, no more running out on hotel bills, no more fly by night stuff. From now on he and Ginny could live in the style to which they were accustomed . . . in their dreams.

"The old goat," he said aloud as he rinsed the blade. "I don't believe he meant all that punishment bunk at all. He just wanted me to have some of his money right now because he knew I needed it. Maybe he was afraid to offer it to me outright, and cooked up this scheme so that I wouldn't be too proud to accept it."

He thought about the case of beer he had sent to his uncle. It was unfortunate, but what the hell. It had accomplished its mission. Jeff had money in his possession.

The sound of voices drifted into the bathroom from the hotel room. Jeff stopped splashing in the sink and listened. He could make out Ginny's voice and those of several men. He frowned, wondering who they were. Then Ginny called.

"Jeff, I think you'd better come out here."

Her tone was peculiar, tight and worried. Hastily wiping the remaining water and lather from his face, Jeff went into the other room.

Two men with blank humorless faces were there, looking around the room. Ginny stood in front of them in a dressing gown.

"You Jeffery Cramer?" one of them

asked when Jeff appeared.

"That's right."

"Okay, Mike. Give the place a going over. I'll talk to Cramer."

Jeff stepped forward. "Now wait a minute—"

The one who did the talking turned cold eyes on him. "Forget it, Cramer. You and I are going to have a little talk. I'm Donaldson from homicide."

He was big, over six feet and a good two hundred and ten. His face was pouchy and red, with a soured on the world expression that reminded Jeff of an unhappy bulldog.

Ginny was trembling. "Jeff what is this?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's his idea of a joke." He ducked his head toward Donaldson.

"I'm laughing," said Donaldson dryly. "This joke is killing me. Were you at Rodney Cramer's home this afternoon?"

"Sure," Jeff admitted. "He called me over himself. He's my uncle."

MIKE, the other detective, was prowling around the room, nosing into everything. Jeff glared at him. "Hey," he growled at him, "you can't do that without a warrant."

"We got one," Mike answered without even looking up.

"Cramer," Donaldson said, "suppose you tell me just what happened there this afternoon."

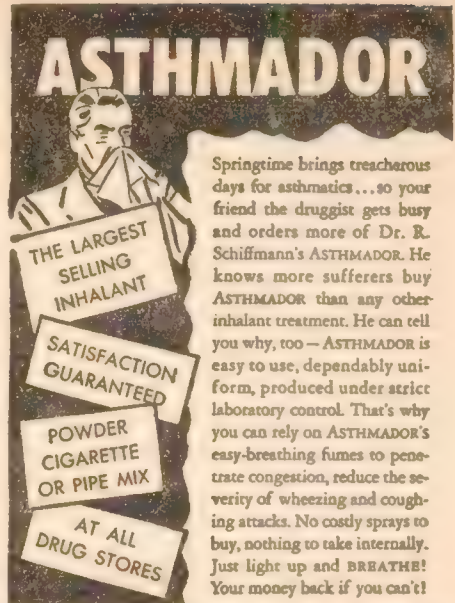
Jeff looked startled. "Why?"

"Because," the detective answered simply. "Rodney Cramer was murdered this afternoon."

Jeff's face bleached white. "No! My God!"

Donaldson nodded wearily. "That's right. So start talking."


Jeff took a minute to collect his thoughts, then gave out the story with a few reservations. Donaldson listened



ASTHMADOR

Springtime brings treacherous days for asthmatics...so your friend the druggist gets busy and orders more of Dr. R. Schiffmann's ASTHMADOR. He knows more sufferers buy ASTHMADOR than any other inhalant treatment. He can tell you why, too—ASTHMADOR is easy to use, dependably uniform, produced under strict laboratory control. That's why you can rely on ASTHMADOR's easy-breathing fumes to penetrate congestion, reduce the severity of wheezing and coughing attacks. No costly sprays to buy, nothing to take internally. Just light up and BREATHE! Your money back if you can't!

- THE LARGEST SELLING INHALANT
- SATISFACTION GUARANTEED
- POWDER CIGARETTE OR PIPE MIX
- AT ALL DRUG STORES



MEN-Build a Wholesale Route

GET INTO A Big Pay Business

We Help You Establish a Steady Route of Dealer Customers

Make good weekly earnings selling stores our BIG line of 200 products—all daily necessities. Show merchants in your locality a sensational line of self-selling counter goods. Retail at 5c and 10c. You make up to 112% commission. No large capital required. Easy to Start!

A fortune spent for National Advertising has made our products known from coast to coast! Send for our booklet "Your Opportunity in a Wholesale Business of Your Own." It's FREE—no obligation. **WRITE TODAY!**


WORLD'S PRODUCTS CO., Dept. 28-N, Spencer, Ind.

ACCOUNTANT

BECOME AN EXPERT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn \$2,000 to \$10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroughly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A.'s. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays." **G. I. APPROVED.**

LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. H-416 Chicago 5, Ill.



ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

THE KIND MEN LIKE! (VEST POCKET SIZE)

They are loaded with rare cartoons. Full of Fun and Humor. **20 DIFFERENT** booklets sent prepaid for \$1 in plain wrapper GRAYKO, Dept. AB-3 Box 520, G. P. O., New York 1

PATENTS

Write for full information on what steps an inventor should take to secure a Patent.

RANDOLPH A BEAVERS, 920 Columbian Bldg., Washington 1, D.C.

**BUY FROM THE OLDEST ESTABLISHED
FIRM IN THE UNITED STATES SELLING
EYE GLASSES BY MAIL**

As Low
As
\$1.95
For
Satis-
faction



Write Today for Free Catalogue. Send No Money
ADVANCE SPECTACLE COMPANY
537 S. Dearborn St., Dept. Z-3 Chicago, Ill.

LEARN TO WRITE

The Magazine Institute offers an up-to-the-minute course in writing for magazines which makes it easy to get started in spare time at home. You may concentrate on either fiction or non-fiction. Send for FREE CATALOG describing M. I. method. **VETERANS: THIS COURSE APPROVED FOR VETERANS' TRAINING.**

THE MAGAZINE INSTITUTE, INC., Dept. 775-E
50 Rockefeller Plaza, Rockefeller Center, New York 20, N. Y.

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

Song Poems

POEMS wanted for musical setting. Send poem for immediate consideration and Free Rhyming Dictionary. Richard Brothers, 96 Woods Building, Chicago, Ill.

POEMS Wanted. Free examination. Send poems to J. Chas. McNeill, Master of Music, 510 2D South Alexandria Ave., Los Angeles 6, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Songs published monthly. Advance royalty. Send your songs or poems today for our exciting offer. Hollywood Tunesmiths, Dept. EE-4, 1537 N. Vine St., Hollywood 28, Calif.

POEMS wanted for musical setting. Send poem for immediate consideration. Hamann Service, 612 Manhattan Building, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Miscellaneous

MAGAZINES (back dated)—foreign, domestic, arts. Books, booklets, subscriptions, pin-ups, etc. Catalog 10c (refunded), Ciccione's Center, 863 First Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

CORRESPONDENCE Courses and self-instruction books slightly used. Sold. Rented. Exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Complete information and 100-page illustrated bargain catalog free! Write Nelson Co., Dept. 56, Chicago 5, Ill.

BORROW by Mail! Loans \$50.00 to \$1,000.00 to employed men and women. Easy, quick. Completely private, confidential. No endorsers. Repay in convenient monthly payments. Details Free in plain envelope. Write First Loan Co., World Herald Bldg., Dept. L-58, Omaha, Nebr.

SCIENTIFICATION, weird, fantastic; books, magazines. Werewolf Bookshop, 621A Maryland, Pittsburgh 6, Pa.

SELLING large stock Fantasy Magazines. Write Fred Claassen, Post Office, Stow, Ohio.

ALASKA—"The Last Frontier" offers thousands of excellent opportunities! \$1.00 brings official Government map and 1947 copyrighted report describing potential opportunities in Commercial Fishing, Mining, Fur Farming, Prospecting, Aviation, Timber, Agriculture, Live Stock Raising, Business Enterprises, Government Homestead Lands. Alaska Opportunist, 6417 Homewood Ave., Dept. ZZ, Hollywood 28, Calif.

INTERESTED in Latin America & Foreign employment? \$1 brings 1947 Foreign Service Directory listing Oil, Aviation, Mining, Transportation, Manufacturing, Construction concerns with foreign interests and tips for immediate application. Global Reports, 6417 Homewood Ave., Dept. ZZ, Hollywood 28, Calif.

AT HOME—Your own manufacturing business; making popular \$1.00 novelties. Cost you 3c to 15c. Everything supplied. Write So-Lo Works, Dept. U-643, Loveland, Ohio.

RARE unique, unusual, mystifying, money-making, occult, so-called illustrated book catalogues. 10c (refundable). Wilborn, 700-AS Judson River Bldg., Los Angeles 13.

RAISE Turkeys the new way. Write for free information explaining how to make up to \$3,000.00 in your own backyard. Address National Turkey Institute, Dept. 280, Columbus, Kansas.

ABUNDANCE. Make up your mind to Have health, friends, opportunities, money, success and happiness—Now! Amazingly easy master formula to Awaken your Soul's Powers of Increase to Supply your needs, desires, and aspirations. Never fails! Money back guarantee. Write: The Christines, Box 9609-ZD, Hollywood 27, Calif.

politely but he wasn't interested. When Jeff finished he shook his head slowly.

"Well," he said, "the butler says he took you up to the old man's room. He heard you leave and went up again, and found him dying of poison. We found out that he cut you out of his will today. Your fingerprints were on the glass in which the poison was administered, and on the bottle in which it came. And twenty thousand dollars which he normally kept in his room was missing. Can you answer any of those questions?"

For a moment Jeff's mind was too numb to assimilate the facts that Donaldson threw at him. He just stood and stared.

Mike walked across the room and handed Donaldson a sheaf of bills. "Here's the money. The whole twenty grand."

Donaldson took it, looked at it, and then at Jeff.

"He gave it to me!" Jeff blurted.

"After cutting you out of his will this morning?" Donaldson sneered.

Mike said, "There are a lot of white crystals in the bottom of his suit coat pocket. I think they're the same stuff that killed the old man."

"Save 'em and get an analysis," Donaldson ordered. He turned back to Jeff. "Get your hat and let's get started.

Suddenly the whole thing was clear in Jeff's mind. He saw what Rodney Cramer had meant when he said the money would hang him. Cramer had invited him over, given him the money, had him handle the glass and the poison bottle. Then he had drunk it. Jeff's fingerprints were in the right places, the timing was right, the money was where it could be found and used as incriminating evidence. Cramer had even planted some of the poison between the bills to sew up his case.

He had said Jeff was guilty by inten-

tion of trying to murder him and that he was going to punish him. . . .

Virginia was having hysterics. Mike lead her to a chair and slapped her face a couple of times to snap her out of it. Jeff's mind began to click. The case against him was air tight. There was only one way out. He made a sudden lunge for the door, while Donaldson was watching Ginny and Mike.

But the big detective was faster than he looked. As Jeff pulled at the door, his fist came around in a powerful hook and caught him in the side of the head. Jeff staggered and then sprawled on the carpet beside the door. Before he could move again Donaldson had clamped the bracelets on his wrists.

He jerked Jeff to his feet. "Come on. Mike'll take care of her."

They went out the door. Behind them Ginny was noisy. "He murdered a dog and he's going to hang! Twenty thousand dollars to punish us!"

Her screaming laughter followed Jeff and the detective down the hall of the hotel, right up to the very door of the elevator.

THE END

WHO IS THE CORPSE?

IT HAS been said that the time is rapidly approaching when scientific systems of identification must be put in force for everyone. There is little doubt that already the needs of positive identification have passed beyond the walls of police stations and penitentiaries. The following are reasons why there should be positive identification of all persons:—

A. Failing to identify the dead may lead to costly and prolonged litigation over questions of inheritance, insurance, etc.

B. A person may contract amnesia or become temporarily insane and not be able to identify himself.

C. Injuries in consequence of accident, fires, cars, and other catastrophes, may so mutilate the victim that he cannot be recognized.

D. War time demands an "all out" identification in combatting sabotage, etc.

E. Fraudulent practices can be more easily overcome in business through a positive personal identification system.

—Willis White.




BEFORE AFTER

Yes, You Can Have
A Good-Looking Nose

Nobody today need go through life with the handicap of a badly shaped nose, disfigured features. Get your copy of **"YOUR NEW FACE IS YOUR FORTUNE."** See how Plastic Surgery quickly, easily re-shapes ugly noses, sets back protruding ears, corrects other defects. This book by a famous plastic surgeon contains over 88 "before and after" photos, answers all the questions usually asked. Sent post-paid in plain wrapper for only 25c.

FRANKLIN HOUSE, Publishers
629 Drexel Bldg., Philadelphia, Pa., Dept. 1-C



DRAW for MONEY

BE AN ARTIST!

Trained Artists are Capable of Earning \$50, \$60, \$75 a Week

It's pleasant and interesting to study Art the W.S.A. way. **COMMERCIAL ART, DESIGNING, CARTOONING** all in ONE complete home study course. No previous Art experience necessary—hundreds have profited by our practical methods since 1914. **TWO ART OUTFITS** furnished. Full information in **FREE BOOK**. "Art for Pleasure and Profit." Write today. Course available under "G.I." Bill.

FREE BOOK gives details!



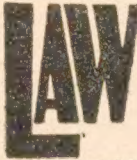
WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART,
Studio 925H, 1115 15th St., N. W.
Washington 5, D. C.

Name..... Age.....

Street

City..... Zone () State.....

☐ I am entitled to training under the G. I. Bill.



STUDY AT HOME for Personal Success and **LARGER EARNINGS.** 38 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All text material furnished. Easy payment plan. Send for **FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance"**—NOW

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 77-R — 646 N. Michigan Ave. Chicago 11, Ill.

ILLUSTRATED COMICS BOOKLETS

Sell our **ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS** and other **NOVELTIES.** Each booklet size 4 1/2 x 2 3/4. We will send 25 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of \$1.00 or 75 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of \$2.00. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C.O.D. Send Cash or Money Order.

REPSAC'S SALES CO.

1 West 13th St., Dept. 40-E New York 11, N. Y.



LEG SUFFERERS

Why continue to suffer without attempting to do something? Write today for New Booklet—"THE LIEPE METHODS FOR HOME USE." It tells about Varicose Ulcers and Open Leg Sores. Liepe Methods used while you walk. More than 40 years of success. Praised and endorsed by multitudes.

LIEPE METHODS, 3284 N. Green Bay Ave.,
Dept. E-59, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

**FREE
BOOKLET**

To People Who Want to Write

but can't get started



Beginner Earns \$1,819.00

"Today I received a check for \$165 for a story. Another I sold for \$34. The other day I counted up just how much I made previously. It amounted to \$1,620.00. Not bad for a beginner, is it?" — Mrs. L. L. Gray, 579 E. McHarg Ave., Stamford, Texas.



Sells 95 Stories and Novelettes

The introduction you gave me to your editor friend, resulting in my present assignment to do a complete novel for him monthly, is doubly appreciated especially since I finished my N.I.A. training some time ago and, consequently, have no call on your service. Here is concrete evidence that interest in your students continues indefinitely. To date now, I have sold 95 stories and novelettes to 20 National Magazines." — Darrell Jordan, P.O. Box 279, Friendship, N.Y.

Do you have the constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of *Liberty* said on this subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling? Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."

Writing Aptitude Test — FREE!

THE Newspaper Institute of America offers a FREE Writing Aptitude Test. Its object is to discover new recruits for the army of men and women who add to their income by fiction and article writing.

The Writing Aptitude Test is a simple but expert analysis of your latent ability, your powers of observation, imagination, dramatic instinct, etc. Not all applicants pass this test. Those who do are qualified to take the famous N.I.A. course based on the practical training given by big metropolitan dailies.

This is the New York Copy Desk Method which teaches you to write by writing! You develop your *individual* style instead of trying to copy that of others.

You "cover" actual assignments such as metropolitan reporters get. Although you work at home, on your own time, you are constantly guided by experienced writers. It is really fascinating work. Each week you see new progress. In a matter of months you can acquire the coveted "professional" touch. Then you're ready for market with greatly improved chances of making sales.

Mail the Coupon Now

But the first step is to take the Writing Aptitude Test. It requires but a few minutes and costs nothing. So mail the coupon now! Make the first move towards the most enjoyable and profitable occupation—writing for publication! Newspaper Institute of America, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. (Founded 1925)

VETERANS:

This course
approved
for Veterans'
Training

Free

Newspaper Institute of America
One Park Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

Send me, without cost or obligation, your Writing Aptitude Test and further information about writing for profit.

Miss }
Mrs. }
Mr. }
Address.....

() Check here if you are eligible under the G.I. Bill of Rights.
(All correspondence confidential. No salesman will call on you.) 102-H-667

'I TALKED WITH GOD'

Impossible — you say? No, it is not impossible. You can do the same thing. For there has come to the earth a brilliant, shining revelation of the power of The Spirit of God. It has come because the human race, through the Atomic Bomb — could very easily annihilate itself. So the Spirit of God has spoken and the revelation and the Power that is following, staggers the imagination. In the past 18 years, **MORE THAN HALF A MILLION** people have told us without our asking them, what happened when they too discovered the actual and literal Power of The Spirit of God, right here on earth, in their own lives.

The future is dangerous. Fear fills most hearts. But may I say to you that there can come into your life, dancing flashes of the Spiritual Power of God? I mean **NOW**. And when you do find, and know this beautiful Power, whatever problems, trials, fears which may beset you, melt away under the shimmering Power of God. In place of these fears, doubts, and trials, there comes a love-



Dr. Frank B. Robinson

ly Peace — a Peace which only God can give —and **POWER?** — well —the human race knows little of this **POWER**, which upsets many old conceptions of God, and puts in **YOUR** hands, and mine, the Power Jesus promised when He said:—“**The things that**

I do shall ye do also.”

I want you to know of this Power. I live for no other purpose. For when this dynamic, invisible Power changed my life, my duty was very plain. **TELL OTHERS**—that’s what God said to me, and I’ve been doing that faithfully for the past 18 years. Write me a simple postcard, or letter, **NOW**, and ask me for my 6000 word message, which will give you a slight insight into the most soul-stirring revelation from God this world has ever known. Address me as follows: —“**DR. FRANK B. ROBINSON**, Dept. 47-17, Moscow, Idaho and this message, which is **TOTALLY FREE**, will be sent by mail immediately. **But write now—ere you forget.** The address again—**Dr. Frank B. Robinson**, Dept. 47-17 Moscow, Idaho.

The Psychiana Religion is, as its name implies, a religious Movement operating under Idaho non-profit religious charter. We are in our 18th year of exclusive operation through the mails. More than half a million people EACH MONTH receive our literature. We operate in our own peculiar way which is different from that of any other religion in America. We plead with every American to allow us to point out this new revelation of the Spirit of God. It is the only revelation which can bring permanent Peace to the human race. It has its inspiration in the Realm of The Spirit of God.

COPYRIGHT 1946 "THE PSYCHIANA RELIGION"

Coming

IN THE JULY ISSUE OF

AMAZING STORIES

HIDDEN CITY

By CHESTER S. GEIER

A complete, book length, science-fiction novel by one of America's favorite fantasy writers

HARVEY DALL had a feeling he was being watched that day at the air terminal. And he was. Even before it happened, he knew he was being drawn into a web from which he could not escape—a web that drew tighter and started him on the weirdest adventure man had ever known. For Harvey Dall found he was on a one-way ride to the moon—to a city fantastic beyond belief. Next month's issue of **AMAZING STORIES** takes you on this thrilling adventure—in the newest science-fiction novel to come from the pen of Chester S. Geier. Be sure to get your copy.

IN THE JULY ISSUE OF
Amazing Stories

On Sale MAY 9TH
AT NEWSSTANDS EVERYWHERE

